

No excuse for sensation

“The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft a-gley.” Robert Burns

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Anon

“Too much analysis leads to paralysis.” Anon.

Reports of global warming and schemes to combat it come pouring off the presses of Europe daily. One of the latest offerings is the UK Draft Climate Change Bill, published on 13 March; it goes along with targets also proposed at the meeting of European leaders in Brussels in the same week. They mirror the target proposals from the 4th International Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) summary report published on 2 February and preceded by the EU Strategic Energy Review of 10 January.

A reduction in carbon dioxide emissions of 60% by 2050 over 1990 figures seems to be universally accepted, with an interim cut of 20% per by 2020, possibly 30% if everyone agrees, including the US, China, India and Brazil. Angela Merkel will urge the adoption of these targets when she hosts the G8 Summit in June.

RELUCTANT

At last, politicians seem to have woken up to the fact that something has to be done and done quickly. But the targets set out are to be legally binding in all 27 member nations, though how that will be enforced by the European Court of Justice remains to be seen; they will be extremely difficult to achieve, if not impossible in the view of the engineers who will have to implement them. Some of the heaviest polluters, former Communist countries such as Czech Republic and Poland, have only

tyranny of Five Year Plans and are reluctant to take on another straitjacket of phased targets. Nuclear power will have to be included in the low-carbon technologies if there is to be any chance of achieving the targets and this presents problems for countries like Germany who intend to phase it out.

DANGER

But there is already a danger that complacency is setting in. The Stern Report and the EU Strategy both suggest that damage to the economy will be minimal if we act now, but procrastination is already eating away at the ten-year window of opportunity that seems to be all that is left to us.

The will to act is further discouraged by a series of articles and particularly a recent **UK Channel 4 TV** programme suggesting that global warming is not a man-made phenomenon but the result of changing solar activity, sun spots, changing patterns in the number of cosmic rays striking the earth and nothing to do with carbon dioxide emissions. Such articles and programmes blunt the enthusiasm for politicians to act, despite the overwhelming evidence from IPCC for man-made global warming.

MEDIA SWINDLE

The media has much to answer for in this respect and the scientific ignorance of most readers and viewers encourages the TV

programmers to produce sensational programmes that receive wide coverage. The Channel 4 programme ‘**The Great Global Warming Swindle**’ is a particularly blatant case. Channel 4, despite distancing itself from the much-criticised programme once transmitted, the science of which was described by a distinguished member of the Royal Meteorological Society as “flaky”, nevertheless cynically reran the programme a week later. My niece, a concerned mother of four living in the South of France, saw the programme in which it was claimed that man-induced climate change was a conspiratorial lie. She wrote to me to say she found the arguments “convincing” but as a musician asked me to help her through the science. Most of the participants taking part in the programme were not climate scientists and one was a science journalist.

EXPLETIVES

Now a series of scientific rebuttals have been published. According to The Times, the producer has rejected the criticism with expletive-ridden e-mails but has since apologised for his language. But serious damage has been done. This raises a general point on science reporting in the media.

With a scientifically gullible public, an unscrupulous TV producer or columnist can produce dangerous and demonstrably wrong “science” with a sensational twist that reels in viewers or sells

newspapers. So-called facts emerging from obscure, lobbying think-tanks should first be checked with reputable scientists working in appropriate fields who are elected members of one of the national academies of science and engineering such as the Royal Society of London (the oldest such academy). The BBC had, for several years, a Science Consultative Group consisting of senior scientific representatives, but it was abandoned in 1990 as unnecessary.

However last year, the BBC’s science flagship Horizon produced a programme purporting to be about the fascinating science and engineering of nuclear fusion. A few of us working in the field were invited for interview but it soon became clear the producer wanted to make a sensational programme about the unproven phenomenon of Cold Fusion. When we explained the very doubtful science and claims for cold fusion, we were stood down and the producer went ahead without us.

ABSURD

This lack of objectivity is justified by the Channel 4 producer Martin Durkin in a press release in which he says “I think it (the TV programme **The Great Global Warming Swindle**) will go down in history as the first chapter in a new era of the relationships between scientists and society. Legitimate scientists - people with qualifications - are the bad guys”. Durkin goes on to quote Nigel Calder, a science journalist, as

Realistic 'climate science'



Citizen Kane: "You report the war. I'll start it."

saying "in science the experts are usually wrong". What absurd, mischievous and arrogant tosh! It illustrates the anarchic thinking rather than professionalism that has overtaken some sections of the media where sensationalism leading to increased sales or viewing figures is all that matters and carefully researched scientific truth goes out of the window.

It is the same cavalier attitude that causes producers to set up a so-called "balanced" discussion

between say an engineer with thirty years experience of nuclear radioactive waste storage and an 18-year-old, emotional member of Greenpeace with no scientific knowledge of the subject and expects viewers or listeners to be informed by what usually turns into an acrimonious dispute; this is seen as good TV or radio.

IGNORANT

The impact of the ignorant and sensational Channel 4 programme is

intensified by the media in general which, while 'tut-tutting' about the impropriety and mischievousness of the programme, goes on to raise its whole profile by endless discussion of it on air, which is just what the producer and Channel 4 want.

The unfortunate end result is that many people who watched the programme right across Europe now think that global warming and climate change are caused by sun spots; they do not read the cogent, scientific criti-

cism of the programme published in the press and scientific journals. So the waters have been muddied just when politicians are, at last, moving towards a consensus on the urgent remedial action to stop further dislocation of our climate. It will be a case of yet more analysis, informed and otherwise, leading to paralysis. Let us hope scientific sense will prevail. ■

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