

RELECTIONS FROM A SCIENTIST from THE HADLEY CENTRE SCIENTIFIC MEETING ON CLIMATE CHANGE, FEBRUARY, 2005

As part of Blair's climate change agenda he set up a meeting for scientists to determine what constituted dangerous climate change. The conference released a critical, carefully worded statement on the "need to stabilise at 400 ppm (parts of CO₂ per million) for it to be very likely (>90%) that global air temperatures will not exceed 2 degrees C above pre- industrial levels. (This is considered 'non-catastrophic')

FIRST PART THE SCIENCE. Potential and likelihood for abrupt climate change. Much of the focus for the first day and half was the science and the scenarios considered included;

- the loss of the Western Antarctic ice sheet (causing major sea level rises)
- the shutdown of the thermo-hyaline circulation (causing the UK climate to be like that of Siberia)
- the shutdown of the 'natural' carbon sink as plant respiration costs exceed the changing chemistry and biology of the worlds oceans (their acidification),
- the loss of the Eastern Amazon due to drought resulting from climate change.

'Climate sensitivity', (the amount of warming predicted from the doubling CO₂ concentrations from pre-industrial levels), was shown to be huge. Temperature rises of more than 10 degrees C are possible. Although mentioned the potential release of methyl- hydrates from the tundra perma-frost was not discussed. Huge scientific progress has been made and consistently the situation seems worse than previously suspected. Off the record the natural scientists called for very low stabilisation targets and fast.

'Dangerous' climate change was acknowledged to be a value judgment and largely a political question. Many felt that climate change is already dangerous, even deadly for some. The role of scientists should be to predict what would happen if society decided to do X, Y or Z.

Uncertainty, the need to reduce uncertainty in order for policymakers to act was a big theme. The chair of one session pointed out that this is largely untrue. The global war on terror had no cost-benefit analysis, no uncertainty analysis, no enquiry into the efficacy of the methods to pursue the ends. Uncertainty is a non-argument. The science is clear in big picture terms. What to do in political terms is the great unknown, whether it's from government-business, NGO, or grassroots activist perspectives.

Lack of awareness. It was said that the problem is enormous, but that people in general don't 'get it', especially as many of the predicted impacts that generate headlines are too far in the future, say 2050, and deal with things people scarcely imagine as possible.

SECOND PART - 'What to do' and other aspects, such as impacts on human health. Much less progress seemed to be made here, and it largely ignored recent scientific findings. The trend was for technological fixes, such as growing trees in the majority world. The obvious point that the land of the tropics and subtropics is already in use, by farmers, indigenous people, and of course millions of other species was not high on the agenda. This is a new form of colonialism by a different name.

This section determinedly looked on the **positive bright side** of policy interventions, quite the opposite of the care and conservatism of the natural scientists work and conclusions. The overall 'feel' seemed to be that there is a **serious, serious problem here, but there is no way to 'realistically' tackle it.** This 'realism' of course means within the current political-economic system. Nobody said it explicitly, but the undercurrent was there:

The end of our current social system, (that of the past few hundred years), is on the cards. It can either be a voluntary transformation, or we can burn all the oil and have such a transformation imposed by nature. It's a stark, yet simple choice.

The conf produced a final short document, the www.stabilisation2005.com
Crisis Forum, academics and NGOs on climate change issues, www.crisis-forum.org.uk