

CLIMATE OF CHERRY-PICKING

by Professor Garth Partridge*

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THE Australian Academy of Science has released a new document, The Science of Climate Change, aimed at the man and woman in the street. It was prepared on behalf of the academy by leading lights of the global warming establishment. Some day the academy may come to regret the arrangement.

The problem is that, after several decades of refining their story, the international gurus of climate change have become very good at having their cake and eating it too. On the one hand they pay enough lip service to the uncertainties of global warming to justify continued funding for their research. On the other, they peddle a belief — this with religious zeal, and a sort of subconscious blindness to overstatement and the cherry-picking of data — that the science is settled and the world is well on its way to climatic disaster. The academy document fits neatly into the pattern. It is a sophisticated production that tells only one side of the story.

For instance, it does not say, or illustrate with a diagram, that all the mainstream climate models have overestimated the general upward trend of global temperature for the past 30 or more years by a factor (on average) of at least two. Nothing is said about the distinct possibility that the models include feedback processes that amplify far too much the effect of increased atmospheric carbon -dioxide.

Instead, the document talks about an apparent pause in global warming since 2001. It attributes the pause to some temporary fluctuation in the internal behaviour of the ocean. It does not mention that for many years climate scientists have deliberately played down the contribution of natural oceanic fluctuations to the rise or fall of global temperature. The possibility of naturally induced rises seriously weakens the overall story of human influence.

The document makes much of the belief that climate models can correctly replicate 20th-century global warming only if they include human influences. It fails to make the point that this says very little for the skill of the models or the modellers.

Recent research on the Roman and -medieval warm periods indicates that both had temperatures and temperature changes very similar to those of the present. Both periods came and went without the benefit of significant human -emissions of carbon dioxide. The document mentions that -long-term regional rainfall predictions are uncertain. It doesn't say that they are probably nonsense. The various model forecasts of the average Australian rainfall for the end of the century range from a doubling to a halving of the -present 450mm a year. It smacks of cherry-picking to display a map of the output from one particular model that indicates a future -reduction in rainfall for most of Australia of the order of 20 per cent.

There has been a goodly amount of arbitrary selection (of data, statistical technique and display) in an illustration of the distribution of the change in observed rainfall over Australia in the past 100 years. The southeast and southwest of the continent are shown as a sea of red, suggesting there has been a frightening decrease across the

period. No mention is made that a more traditional presentation of the data gives an entirely different picture.

In the southwest, the recent annual average rainfall has simply returned to something close to its value for the 15 or so years before about 1905. In most of the southeast, there has been no statistically significant change at any time.

And so on it goes. Basically the academy has fallen into the trap of being no more than a conduit for a massive international political campaign seeking to persuade a sceptical public of the need for drastic action on climate change. There are more than enough organisations already doing that.

Perhaps instead the academy could be persuaded to spend its considerable intellectual capital on problems relevant to the -general conduct of research — -problems that the climate issue has brought well into the open. Among them are a peer-review system that is arguably corrupted by groupthink; a deliberate banishment of contrary opinion to the internet; and a publish-or-perish syndrome that is -completely out of hand.

Maybe the academy could use the resource of its overall fellowship to identify those situations where scientists have too much skin in a political game. US President Dwight Eisenhower foresaw that problem many years ago in his retirement speech to the nation: “The prospect of domination of the nation’s scholars by federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present — and is gravely to be regarded. Yet ... we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could -itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite.”

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