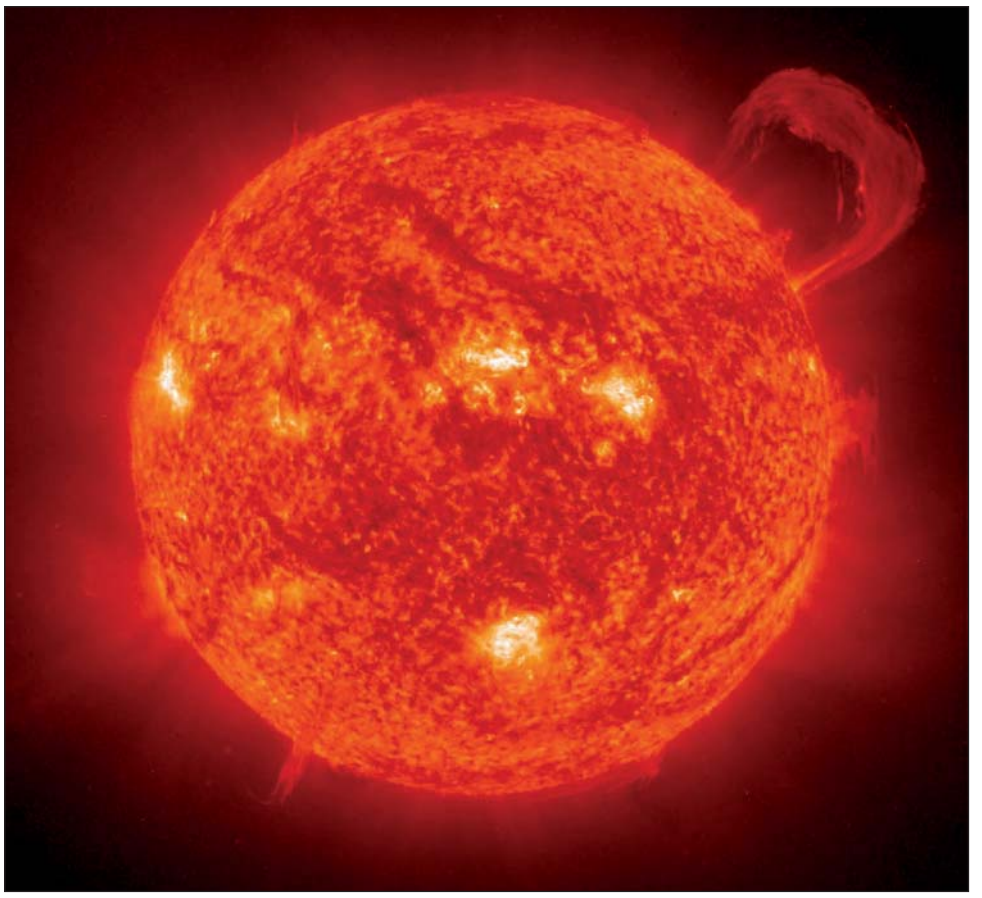
CLIMATE CHANGE

Leading the world back to sanity

Act proposal provides chance for rethink of doomsday policies

Tom Harris
in Ottawa



HELIOGENIC: New research shows that it is the sun that is the leading cause of global warming and cooling

Climate scientists from around the world will be watching closely to see how the new National-led government will implement Act's proposal to "hear competing views on the scientific aspects of climate change from internationally respected sources and assess the quality and impartiality of official advice."

Such a step is crucial, climate specialist Professor Tim Patterson of Carleton University in Ottawa told Canadian government hearings on climate change in 2005, "otherwise, policy becomes disconnected from science, and we may waste billions of dollars going in entirely the wrong direction."

Sadly, the new Conservative government of Canada, and those of most other countries as well, have done the exact opposite of Professor Patterson's recommendation, specifically excluding competing science from climate change hearings and the resulting policy formulation processes.

New Zealand now has an opportunity to set an example to the world and help restore a more rational approach to climate policy, one based on a full understanding of the relevant science, not just that which supports politically convenient views.

Prime Minister John Key's promise that "we're putting all things on the table" in the climate hearings must include the science, not as an afterthought, but first and foremost.

If the hearings show that the fundamental science backing human-caused climate concerns is wrong, or even in serious doubt (as much of it is), then the rest of the debate (tax versus emissions trading, etc) is pointless and they might as well wrap up the testimonies right there.

Most people do not realise that Earthly temperatures have been far higher than today many times in the past, and occasionally colder. As recently as 6000 years ago, it was about three degrees Celsius warmer than now.

Some 11,500 years ago, while the world was coming out of the thousand-year-long "Younger Dryas" cold episode, Professor Patterson explains that temperatures rose about 5° C in a single decade – that is nearly 100 times faster than the 20th century's 0.6° C warming that climate campaigners believe is a precursor to catastrophic global warming.

But what will happen over the 21st century? Scientists don't know, although there are indications that the first half of the century will see significant natural cooling, as is occurring right now. Whether it warms after that is anyone's guess since climate change research is now in an era of "negative discovery" – the more we learn, the more complexity we discover and the more uncertain our predictions become.

Since the creation of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, there has been more research in the field than in all previous years combined and discoveries are being made that completely shatter many previous ideas about how the climate system works.

If we had known in 1997 what we know today about climate, there would be no Kyoto Protocol because it would have been considered unnecessary.

So what caused the modest warming of the past century? It appears to have been caused mostly by changes in the output of the sun.

Professor Patterson, and many other scientists, are consistently finding excellent correlations between the regular fluctuations in the brightness of the sun and the planet's climate. This is not unexpected. After all, the sun and the stars are the ultimate source of all energy on Earth.

These new findings suggest that changes in the output of the sun have caused most recent climate change. By comparison, variations in carbon dioxide, the gas most targeted by national climate change campaigns, have shown poor correlation with the planet's climate on long, medium and even short time scales.

Solar scientists predict that, by 2020, the sun will be starting into its weakest 11-year Schwabe solar cycle of the past two centuries, likely leading to cooler conditions on Earth.

Beginning to plan for adaptation to such a cool period, one that is projected to encompass several Schwabe cycles, as did the Little Ice Age between about 1400 and the mid 1800s, should be a priority for governments. It is global cooling, not warming, that is the major climate threat to the world.

It is during cold periods when the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events are greatest. The main driver of weather is the difference between temperatures in high and low latitude regions and, as this differential is expected to decrease in a warmer world, rising global temperatures would produce a tranquilising effect on weather.

It is also during cold periods when disease, war and famine have most afflicted humanity. The axiom "warming is good and cooling bad for human civilisation" has been proven throughout history. We are the first generation in which the belief that climatic warming is bad has entered popular culture. And yet this belief does not reflect current scientific knowledge.

The science of global climate change is still in its infancy, with many thousands of papers published every year. In a 2003 poll conducted by environmental researchers Dennis Bray and Hans von Storch, of the Institute for Coastal Research in Germany, two-thirds of more than 530 climate scientists from 27 countries surveyed did not believe that "the current state of scientific knowledge is developed well enough to allow for a reasonable assessment of the effects of greenhouse gases."

About half of those polled stated that the science of climate change was not sufficiently settled to pass the issue over to policymakers.

Holding unbiased hearings into the current state of climate science is neither right nor left wing – it is centrist, and a common-sense, responsible first step any government would be well advised to take before it considers alienating its people with burdensome schemes in an attempt to accomplish the impossible task of controlling the world's climate.

Ironically, for reasons he apparently does not appreciate, US President-elect Barack Obama was more than correct when he said, "Stopping climate change won't be easy. It won't happen overnight." Let's hope not. The only way to "stop climate change" would be to entirely strip away the Earth's atmosphere – the climate of any planet with an atmosphere always changes.

Professor Patterson's 2005 Canadian Parliamentary testimony applied equally well to New Zealand when he said, "Until we have a far better understanding of the underlying science, the government should cancel funding allocated to stopping climate change, which is ridiculous. The only constant about climate is change. Instead, we should be preparing for whatever nature throws at us next, as well as continuing to fund research that will help us to eventually understand our planet's complex climate system."

Tom Harris is a mechanical engineer and executive director of the International Climate Science Coalition, www.climatescienceinternational.org

World watches New Zealand's climate change moves

Treading a delicate path, the country hopes to come up with a plan by 2010

Nevil Gibson

New Zealand has officially dropped back in the climate change stakes to "fast follower" or even "middle of the pack" as a result of Act negotiating with National to re-open the debate at select committee level.

New Zealand's move to review its carbon emissions trading scheme has attracted international attention, mainly because more European leaders are back-pedalling on the costs of the Kyoto Protocol and what will replace it (if anything).

EU leaders are divided on a new climate package, mainly because fragile economies cannot bear further job losses and other burdens.

While Act leader Rodney Hide intended the committee to tackle the wider issues, including whether climate change is anthropogenic (caused by humans), the committee's terms of reference seem to back chairman Peter Dunne's contention that this is not up for discussion.

Climate Change Minister Nick Smith says the main goal will be to build a broader consensus about how to make progress on climate change issues.

The committee is due to report back by March so any replacement scheme is ready by 2010.

The terms of reference are:

- **identify the central/benchmark projections which are being used as the motivation for international agreements to combat climate change; and consider the uncertainties and risks surrounding those projections**
- **hear views from trade and diplomatic experts on the international relations aspects of this issue**
- **consider the prospects for an international agreement on climate change post Kyoto 1, and the form such an agreement might take**
- **require a high quality, quantified, regulatory impact analysis to be produced to identify the net benefits or costs to New Zealand of any policy action, including international relations and commercial benefits and costs**
- **consider the impact on the New Zealand economy and New Zealand households of any climate change policies, having regard to the weak state of the economy, the need to safeguard New Zealand's international competitiveness, the position of trade-exposed industries, and the actions of competing countries**
- **examine the relative merits of a mitigation or adaptation approach to climate change for New Zealand**
- **consider the case for increasing resources devoted to New Zealand-specific climate change research, examine the relative merits of an emissions trading scheme or a tax on carbon or energy as a New Zealand response to climate change**
- **consider the need for any additional regulatory interventions to combat climate change if a price mechanism (an ETS or a tax) is introduced**
- **consider the timing of introduction of any New Zealand measures, with particular reference to the outcome of the December 2009 Copenhagen meeting, the position of the US, and the timetable for decisions and their implementation of the Australian government.**

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