

Shooting the messenger

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has a creditable record of developing a scientific consensus and delivering it to policy-makers. What its critics really object to are the facts.

The drumbeat of diversionary noise that US coal and oil producers have created around climate-change science has a certain inevitable rhythm, all of its own. Take this year's events, for example (although those of any one of the past 15 years would do). The Bush administration, short of scientific advisers of its own but keen to justify its premature dismissal of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, asked the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a rapid-fire study into climate-change questions.

The study's main charge was to assess the scientific evidence that greenhouse-gas emissions are contributing to global warming. To nobody's surprise, it answered in the affirmative. However, the final part of the study's charge asked: do the summary documents prepared by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reflect its underlying study of climate-change issues? The academy found that they did. Indeed, during the study, the academy asked US participants in the IPCC process if they felt that their views had been reflected fairly in the international organization's summary documents. Every participant who responded said that the summaries had been fair.

What a surprise, then, to find that the same charges of distortion-by-summary that climate-change sceptics made against the IPCC are now being repeated against the all-American National Academy. Within days of the study's release, critics were busy fulminating against the academy's process and the way in which the report had been summarized and represented in the media.

Inclusion tactics

The perennial charge against the IPCC (see News Feature, page 112) is that its summary-making process involves politicians and non-governmental organizations, as well as scientists. But in this regard, the IPCC process is actually ahead of that commonly used by the US National Academies and other groups engaged in advising governments around the world on assessing and managing risk.

A key element to producing a convincing scientific-risk assessment, according to the National Academy's seminal 1996 report, *Understanding Risk: Informing Decisions in a Democratic Society*, is that interested parties should be involved in the assessment while it is being made. The report argued that this is preferable to the traditional, linear model of risk management, whereby scientists assess the risk and then dump their findings on the politicians who are expected to manage it.

So the IPCC process is a markedly modern one whose overall effect has been, on balance, to moderate the findings of its various working groups. Detailed examination of the process shows that it has a reasonable track record of producing summary documents that, while lacking all of the detailed qualification contained in the full working-group reports, honestly reflect their findings.

Why, then, is it embroiled in so much criticism? If the IPCC's record is set against its critics' charges, it soon becomes apparent that the answer to this question lies in the latter group's unscrupulous determination to defy the facts on climate change to the bitter end.

Right from the outset, the approach of certain industrial lobby groups in the United States has been to resist, resist and resist

again the mounting evidence that the consumption of fossil fuels is producing emissions that change the make-up of the atmosphere and may endanger the future of the planet. The industry groups in question are accustomed to the untrammelled purchase of political power in the United States and have consistently sought to distort the climate-change debate for their own purposes.

Creating dissent

To this end, they have championed specious scientific findings and worked to establish a bogus scientific debate between their own 'experts' — many of whom are not even atmospheric scientists — and the consensus view of climate researchers. In doing this, they have deliberately set out to take maximum advantage of media gullibility, ensuring that stories on the problem include both 'sides' of the debate.

Science can only progress through its strong tradition of debate and dissent. But this particular debate discredits the notion of scientific dissent. Some of the climate-change dissidents bring to mind the AIDS dissidents who spent the 1990s putting about notions that HIV didn't cause AIDS and that there was no AIDS pandemic in Africa. Others resemble the tobacco-industry dissidents who resisted that industry's regulation to the last, on the basis of what later emerged as the misrepresentation of science funded by cigarette manufacturers.

The campaign to confuse and delude the US public on global warming has had its successes, but it has been less effective than its originators like to pretend. The public is not amused by President Bush's dismissal of the Kyoto Protocol and it is notable that Senator John McCain (Republican, Arizona) returned from his unsuccessful fight with Bush for the Republican nomination convinced, by his encounters with the public, that action on carbon emissions was needed.

The Bush administration persists in repeating the fiction, both at home and abroad, that the US Senate has already rejected the Kyoto Protocol by 95 votes to 0. In fact, on 25 July 1997, the Senate passed the non-binding Byrd–Hagel Resolution by that margin. This called for developing countries to be more involved in the protocol, which was negotiated a few months later.

Senator Robert Byrd (Democrat, West Virginia), the co-sponsor of that resolution, lambasted the Bush administration on 4 May of this year for its summary rejection of the Kyoto process, and many US senators do, in fact, support action — even mandatory action — on carbon emissions. The political consensus in the United States is that Bush's ratings with the public have largely fallen on account of his environmental missteps, of which the abandonment of Kyoto was the most celebrated.

The Senate is by no means ready to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in its existing form, but neither is US public opinion where Bush pretends it to be, in outright opposition. No amount of sniping at the IPCC by the Global Climate Coalition — itself a depleted operation following the defection of the car manufacturers and some oil companies — will convince the US public that global warming is an imaginary problem. The IPCC should continue its valuable work in the knowledge that its integrity and adherence to the facts will ultimately prevail, bringing credit to both its architects and its participants. ■