



Keep a weather eye open

Bob Carter can't find any conviction in the latest climate talk

IF, COULD, may, might, probably, perhaps, likely, expected, projected... wonderful words. So wonderful, in fact, that Queensland ministers Henry Palaszczuk (Resources) and Desley Boyle (Environment) are unable to resist using them more than 50 times in a 32-page report. That's a rate of almost twice a page.

The subject of the report, released last week, was climate change, and, given its contents, it carried the unlikely moniker, "Climate Smart".

In the second paragraph of the ministers' introductory message we learn that "our climate... is changing". This underwhelming message – for climate has always changed and always will – scarcely seems to justify the expense of distributing such a glossy booklet.

Read on. The next sentence informs us: "The changes observed over the last century cannot be explained by natural influences alone. Human activities are helping to change our climate."

And then off the ministers go on one of their "could probably" runs, asserting that Queensland's climate could be more variable and extreme in the future "with more droughts, heatwaves and heavy rainfall" and probably with "maximum temperatures and heavy downpours... beyond our current experiences".

Really? How do the ministers know all this?

Well, read on some more, and on page seven you will be rewarded with the knowledge that "climate change projections are developed from a range of computer-based models of global climate, and scenarios of future global greenhouse gas emissions". Ahaaah! So we are talking about computer predictions here. No wonder the ministers are in "could probably" mode.

For, as French military expert Pierre Gallois has pointed out: "If you put tomfoolery into a computer, nothing comes out of it but tomfoolery. But this tomfoolery, having passed through a very expensive machine, is somehow ennobled and no one dares criticise it."

But actually we are not talking about computer predictions at all, but, as the ministers rightly say, with computer scenarios. What a difference that word makes.

The dynamics of climate and its changes are incredibly complex and include abundant non-linear relationships between different factors, such as increasing carbon dioxide and temperature.

As Edward Lorenz, chaos theoretician and discoverer of the "butterfly effect", knew only too well, tiny changes in marginal factors in such systems can dramatically change the outcome, since non-linear systems are inherently unpredictable.

No matter how clever our scientists or how big and fast we make our computers, it is unlikely that we will ever be able to predict climate accurately 50 years or more in advance. The scientists who

produced the "predictions" of future Queensland climate for the ministers understand the non-linear nature of climate full well, which is precisely why they use the term "scenarios" to describe the imaginary futures painted by their advanced computer games.

Indeed, so keen are they to avoid being held legally accountable for their opinions that the CSIRO climate modelling team has inserted the following disclaimer in the report it prepared for the Queensland Government: "This report relates to climate change scenarios based on computer modelling. Models involve simplifications of the real processes that are not fully understood.

"Accordingly, no responsibility will be accepted by CSIRO or the Queensland Government for the accuracy of forecasts or predictions inferred from this report or for any person's interpretations, deductions, conclusions or actions in reliance on this report."

You "could probably" say that the authors of the climate change scenarios being deployed by the Queensland Government on our behalf, though not for our benefit, seem a teensy-weensy bit lacking in confidence in their projections.

Swedish oceanographer Professor Gosta Wallin got it right when he said: "The Global Climate Models are nothing more than interesting toys to play with. In no other 'science' would it be possible to use predictions (from GCMs) with no prediction value – call them scenarios – which is only guess work, and be serious about it."

But let us leave the last word with one of Australia's most distinguished climate scientists, a founder member and long-time supporter of the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and a former chief of the Bureau of Meteorology.

John Zillman said (and he is right) that "the most important question – should global warming proceed as the IPCC reports suggest – is how will warming be manifest at the national, regional and local level, and what would that mean for each of us?" Zillman answered his important question by saying: "I believe this question is, at present, completely unanswerable."

He is right again, for all competent experts in computer modelling agree with his assessment that regional climate prediction is impossible. How can it be that ministers Palaszczuk and Boyle, and the Queensland Government, know better?

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Words of conviction? I don't think so. Words of weaseldom? Let the reader judge.

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