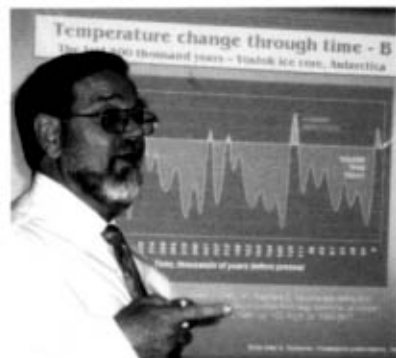


OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

There is little disagreement over the existence of climate change – the global debate is whether it's influenced significantly by human activity or is simply a natural variation.



Prof Bob Carter speaking at Parliament House.

Last issue's main theme of climate change, 'the cracks are starting to show', has a deeper meaning than the cracks appearing in the world's production and consumption systems – it also symbolises divisions in the scientific world.

In the April quarter we looked at climate change as a phenomenon caused by an increase in greenhouse gases produced through human activity. In this issue we look at the flip side of that argument, that climate variation is a natural occurrence to which humans contribute very little.

One advocate of this line of reasoning is research professor Bob Carter of James Cook University in Queensland. Carter is a specialist in palaeontology, marine geology and environmental science. His current research, supported by grants from public research agencies including the Australian Research Council, focuses on climate change, sea-level change and stratigraphy. Here he outlines his research and how he believes it should influence our response.

"My personal research is based on deep-sea cores from the Pacific Ocean that contain a detailed record of climate change going back about five million years. That record, and many other similar records, show that climate is always changing. Therefore the proper question about today is not 'is the climate changing?' but 'is the climate changing at a rate or to a magnitude that lies outside previous natural variations?' The answer to the latter question is unequivocally no.

"Geological data are important precisely because they bring the matter of context into the climate change debate. The *mechanisms* by which weather (and therefore climate) change are properly the province of meteorologists, climatologists and atmospheric physicists. The *history* of climate change is the province of geologists.

"The view widely promulgated in the media is that present-day climate change has been shown to have a human cause and to be dangerous. Neither proposition is true."

This widely accepted consensus, he says, has been promoted by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

"The IPCC has repeatedly advised governments that human-caused climate change is a problem so severe that attempts should be made to prevent it. However, the IPCC is in large part a political rather than scientific body, and many scientists, including distinguished ones, disagree with its advice.

"One of the biggest problems regarding the public discussion is that the most influential persons in our community are almost entirely innocent of real knowledge and understanding about climate change. Thus they base their views on slavish adherence to the IPCC's flawed advice and get most indignant with those who, from an expert perspective, criticise it.

"Change is what climate does. The problem is that the public is being widely misled to believe that the climate changes that occurred



last century, and that continue to occur now, are entirely or mostly human-caused and dangerous. Neither proposition can be demonstrated, and both are unlikely. The only sensible thing to do about climate change is to prepare for it."

Carter says this preparation should involve a few important initiatives.

"Much better mechanisms are needed for monitoring ongoing climate change, especially improved methods of data collection and disclosure for global datasets that relate to weather and climate.

"Research money needs to be focused on the occurrence and understanding of natural cycles of climate change and their origin - leading, it is hoped, to improved climate predictability - and away from the obsession with the greenhouse hypothesis, which has been tested to the tune of \$50 billion of expenditure since 1990, only to fail the test.

"Response to climate change should be adaptive, as it is to other similarly unpredictable natural hazards such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis.

"And especially, plans need to be in place to deal with climatic coolings as well as warmings. Coolings are in fact more likely, more dangerous and more costly than the type of gentle warming that occurred in the late 20th century."

Carter's views have resonated with some developers, including Paul Brinsmead, joint managing director of ResortCorp, a development company with a focus on luxury

beachside and urban lifestyle development.

"Professor Carter's views are far more persuasive than arguments to the contrary," Brinsmead says. "It is reasonable for any lay person, any non-scientist, to understand that the earth has undergone constant cycles of warm periods and ice-age periods.

"Governments that put in place the type of adjustments proposed because of the views expressed on man-made climate change will cause a catastrophic effect on all sectors of business and substantially reduce living standards for every single person on this planet."

Brinsmead says the proposed adjustments will affect the development industry in several ways. Projects will be assessed against the likely effects of carbon emissions, resulting in fewer development approvals. The approval process will take much longer, and the cost of approved developments will rise because of compliance measures to reduce carbon emissions.

Carter says it's important for the development industry to separate the issues of sustainable building and climate change.

"Sustainability is an issue separate from climate change. As a concept, sustainability is on the one hand a motherhood statement with which everyone agrees. And on the other, sometimes it's an unjustifiable inhibition on undertaking needed, useful and otherwise environmentally friendly developments.

"Cases need to be assessed on their merits, in particular their overall environmental footprint - not necessarily including strict

sustainability, which is as much a philosophical as a practical viewpoint - and their cost-effectiveness.

"Though increasingly demonised by societal pressure and government regulation, carbon dioxide emissions cannot be shown to be environmentally harmful. Indeed, the gentle warming and improved plant productivity and water use efficiency that atmospheric carbon dioxide engenders mean that such emissions can be sensibly argued to be an environmental good. Amid the present media hysteria about climate change, it is difficult to get that view even considered, let alone taken seriously.

"Water is also a separate, if related, issue, on which I am not expert. That said, common sense, economics and good environmental stewardship all suggest that water conservation is sensible."

There are many scientists that support Carter's research - just as there are many others that support the man-made global warming theory. And, to confuse matters further, there are more than two sides to the climate change debate, with other scientists holding entirely different views.

"The biggest untruth about human global warming is the assertion that nearly all scientists agree it is occurring, and at a dangerous rate," Carter says.

"The reality is that almost every aspect of climate science is the subject of vigorous debate."

The only way forward, it seems, is to keep informed and make up your own mind. ♦