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Climate guru Blair won't save us

What's so special about global warming, Mr Blair, asks **Bob Carter**

CLIMATE messiah Tony Blair is set to serve alongside climate tsar Al Gore in his mission to save the planet, a good tiding that is doubtless cause for rejoicing among the glorious choirs of climate angels.

Blair's new role is as chairman of The Climate Group, an international non-profit lobby group funded by corporations and governments. That he and Gore can be taken seriously as climate advisers is a source of wonderment, for their public utterances betray an almost complete ignorance about the working's of Earth's complex climate system.

Addressing a meeting of senior bureaucrats at a recent G20 meeting in Tokyo, Blair observed that, "even on the mildest application of the precautionary principles, failure to act on climate change now would be deeply and unforgivably irresponsible". What does he mean?

Note, first, that Blair is not actually referring to climate change as such, but rather wishes to raise the spectre of dangerous human-caused global warming, which is a largely different matter. The semantic confusion is not accidental but instead a tactic used by climate alarmists to further their cause. For the simple fact is that (natural) climate change has always occurred, and always will: in this context "climate change" always provides something to raise alarm about, irrespective of whether the globe is actually warming or cooling.

Equally obviously, human-caused global warming cannot always have occurred. Human change needs to be demonstrated as a historical reality distinct from natural change rather than simply being mouthed as a mantra. This, of course, Blair has not done. Yet the science facts of the matter are clear and relatively uncontroversial.

Human modification of the environment on a scale that might potentially affect climate began during the great pioneer-settler movements of the 19th century. The large-scale clearing of forest (often dark-coloured) and its replacement by crops or grassland (lighter coloured) by pastoralists and farmers changed the reflectivity of large areas of the Earth's surface as seen from above. In turn, this meant that less daytime solar radiation was absorbed at ground level and more was reflected to space. This resulted in a local cooling effect, and often also changes in local evaporation and rainfall patterns.

Over the same time period, urban developments — with all their associated bricks, concrete, glass and asphalt — started to absorb more solar heat than the former natural landscape, leading to local warming in the vicinity of towns and cities. This, the so-called urban heat island effect, often amounts to a several-degree warming for large cities.

An obvious conclusion results, which is that humans do indeed have an effect on local climate and, to boot, an effect which in different places may variously be a warming or a cooling.

With fast industrialisation and population growth after World War II, another reputedly villainous actor appeared on the scene, namely human-sourced carbon dioxide emissions. Because it is a greenhouse gas, albeit a minor one, increasing the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere does exert a small primary warming effect, though it is of increasingly less magnitude as the carbon dioxide level rises. The primary warming is then amplified or moderated by feedback effects. For example, an accompanying increase in water vapour (which is by far the main greenhouse gas) can cause additional warming, whereas an increasing cloudiness can cause cooling by increased reflection of solar radiation. No one knows accurately the balance of these two and all other carbon dioxide feedback loops.

Nonetheless, it is clear that if all human influences on climate are added up worldwide, including the effect of carbon dioxide, then a human influence on global climate must result. But the fact that many scientists also suppose the overall effect will be one of warming does not discount the alternative — that the human signal might instead be one of cooling. In the absence of conclusive data, either outcome remains possible.

Unfortunately, temperature measurements made using thermometers do not produce results with one part of the signal badged "natural temperature change" and another part carrying the label "human-caused temperature change". Additionally, 150 years of temperature records reveal the presence of large between-year changes. Not surprisingly, therefore, a human global temperature signal has not yet been isolated from background natural variation, and it is therefore most likely that the human signal lies buried within the noise of the natural climate system.

Not content with failing to explain these important matters, and confusing us with semantics, Blair also expresses a wish that world governments should apply the precautionary principle in formulating climate policy.

Doubtless a fine intention, but in reality a complete fizzer. For to take precautions you have to know what it is that you are taking them against.

Yet so far as predictability is concerned, the odds of next year's temperature being higher or lower than this year's are roughly even.

During the 20th century, global temperature initially increased for several decades, decreased for the next 30 years during mid-century, and then increased again for 20 years towards the end of the century.

Not insignificantly, the most recent mild warming is termed the "late 20th century" warming because it terminated in 1998. The best available temperature measurements from satellites show that between 1998 and 2007, for nine full years, average global temperature remained unchanged — at the same time as carbon dioxide levels increased by almost 5 per cent. Interestingly, given that some physicists are predicting the start of a new episode of solar-driven cooling, global temperature has now been cooling for the three years since 2005.

So what is it that Blair would like us to take precautions against? Is it past warmings, or the present and perhaps likely future cooling? And why does he irrationally view one effect (warming) as more dangerous than the other (cooling)?

That Blair can get away with making so many implicit mistakes and misassumptions in just one short sentence may reflect his pedigree as a successful politician. But it surely does nothing for the credibility of The Climate Group as a source of independent and accurate advice on human-caused global warming.

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Perspectives

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