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Deep-seated ambiguity

YOUR editorial (“Unthinking dogma”, 29-30/11) was a welcome reminder that the science of climate change is far from settled, and that no consensus exists regarding the degree of danger posed by human activity. Unfortunately, the first few words of the piece — “If climate change is real . . .” — conceal a deep-seated ambiguity between natural and human-caused change that bedevils nearly all public discussion of the global warming issue. This same confusing ambiguity applies to Steve Rintoul’s letter (2/12) about Southern Ocean change.

There is no “if” about it. In the eyes of all scientists, climate change is most certainly real; change is what climate does. Thanks more to Dorothea Mackellar than to scientists, nearly all Australians understand this, and also that we inhabit a continent that is particularly vulnerable to climate change; witness, for instance, both recent drought and storms. However, these events relate to natural climate variability or change, which all on their own entail various combinations

of warming or cooling and flooding or drought. The additional, and quite proper, question as to whether human carbon dioxide emissions are adding an additional and dangerous warming effect to natural change remains unresolved after 20 years of investigation, and despite the expenditure of more than \$US50 billion looking unsuccessfully for the effect.

In the meantime, of course Australia needs a proper adaptive national policy on climate change which, inter alia, allows for the possibility of managing future human-caused change too, should it eventuate. But because of the economic and social damage that it will cause, thereby hindering our capacity to adapt, the imposition of a new carbon dioxide tax (aka emissions trading scheme) would be a misguided step in precisely the wrong direction.

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