



# Weathering the scaremongers' storms

The Government has a better idea of how to run energy policy than the Kyoto zealots, suggests **Bob Carter**

**T**HE Howard Government's new energy policy commits \$575 million to low emission technology and solar cities funding. The policy also opposes signing the Kyoto accord or increasing the level of the mandatory renewable energy target scheme. Less obviously beneficial, because it includes support for environmentally damaging side-shows such as wind power, is the \$134 million for other renewable energy technologies.

In general, however, these are excellent decisions with strong economic and environmental benefits, and should be widely supported. They have been welcomed by the Business Council of Australia, but other public reaction has consisted of shrill criticism. The criticism rests partly on naked self-interest, and partly on an utterly inadequate understanding of the realities of climate change science and of the art of government for the welfare of all.

The degree of public misinformation makes this a particularly difficult time to decide environmental or energy issues. Pity the government that faces the task.

First, it is deafened by loud self-interest lobby groups ranging from environmental zealots on the Left to free-market economists on the Right. At the same time, it remains insulated from accurate scientific advice, for today's scientific civil service and universities have been much degraded by the seductive calls of "user pays" and "must be in the national interest" funding for science.

If a scientist's job depends on

there being a "national interest" environmental problem, then such problems will surely proliferate. As indeed they have.

Next, government must deal with a public spooked by rollicking entertainment films such as *The Day After Tomorrow*, a Jules Verne successor with the addition of a nasty propaganda tail. After the climate cataclysm which the film depicts, the US president delivers a mea culpa for not having controlled the burning of fossil fuels. That this implied cause and effect is as imaginary as the rest of the film will be lost on most viewers.

Third, government can no longer rely on the environmentalists to sing — as they usually do — in unison from the same hymn book. Jim Lovelock, of Gaia fame, has recently commented that nuclear energy offers the only realistic chance of environmentally friendly power for the future. And the affable David Bellamy reminds us that carbon dioxide is not a pollutant, but rather a plant fertiliser that causes his beloved plants to grow more vigorously.

And all this is against last week's announcement of new high-quality climate records from two long drill cores. One, of ice, from Antarctica, and another of deep sea mud from east of New Zealand. These cores confirm that about every 100,000 years the globe's climate has been cycling back and forth between long, cold glacial and short, warm interglacial conditions.

**R**ECENTLY, the warm periods have averaged 10,000 years. This is the length of time our present warm interglacial has lasted, during which civilisation as we know it developed.

Scientists know that it is soon going to get colder, as the Earth heads into the next glaciation, but they differ sharply on what "soon" means. Some believe cooling could begin tomorrow, and others that it may be up to 15,000 years away. Yet others think climatic decline has already started and is only being held in check by human-induced warming.

The reality is that no one knows what Earth's climate will do over the next decade and longer. And until they do, scaremongering about imagined global warming, or trying to panic governments into increasing MRET levels or signing ineffective protocols such as Kyoto, is simply irresponsible.

In the face of such scientific, economic and political complexity, the Government should be congratulated for having steered a middle course through the often uncharted seas of energy science and economics, export marketing, climate change and environmentalism to arrive at the harbour of genuine national interest.

On the evidence to hand, John Howard is entitled to his claim that the Government's energy white paper "secures our energy future for all Australians".

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