

## Health Warning: Global Warming

Not long ago, a young bloke was stuck next to me on a plane. He was a trader at a fruit and vegetable market with an enthusiasm for wheeling and dealing that was almost infectious. Business was good and he reckoned Prime Minister John Howard was a top bloke.

As the conversation progressed, my travelling companion twigged that I might be a “professional Howard-hater”. I patiently explained that you couldn’t earn a living from hating the PM but did admit that, with luck and skill, a small degree of income supplementation was possible.

My new friend invited me to outline our leader’s flaws – but we got nowhere talking about refugees, wars or ethics. To my surprise, however, he was genuinely upset to learn that Australia and the USA were the only developed countries refusing to sign the Kyoto Protocol.

Keeping an eye on the weather is worthwhile. That’s something I picked up while living on a yacht, and it’s also important at the fruit and vegetable markets. Nature can be violent. The Boxing Day tsunami wiped out about three hundred thousand people in a few hours. After two years of fighting, the Iraq war has killed fewer. The wave wins.

The Kyoto Protocol, which aims for a modest 5% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2012, recently came into force. Environmentalists say it’s too little, too late. Economists say it’s a needless drag on human enterprise – and, anyway, most climate models suggest the deadliest impact will be in Africa.

Confrontation makes good media. Regarding climate change, we have the spectacle of the Environmentalist-Climatologist Team versus The (so-called) Sceptics. Indeed, all issues should be approached with a degree of scepticism. I’m not immediately enamoured by a pack of climatologists having their time in the sun, grabbing more funding than they’ve seen since the last Ice Age.

But the so-called sceptics are less convincing. For starters, they’re thin on the ground once you exclude obvious commercial and political players, and self-promoters from unrelated fields. Plus, David Bellamy’s voice is as irritating as his science. (In April, Bellamy incorrectly wrote in *New Scientist* that nearly all of the world’s glaciers were growing. It now seems that the scientific source of Bellamy’s claim was a crank architect’s website, and Bellamy further exaggerated the claim by failing to hold down the shift key and typing a 5 instead of the % symbol!)

It’s compulsory to fear terrorists and acceptable to fret about doomsday asteroids. After all, these are problems that our glorious lead-

ers can nuke. But we’re expected to stay relaxed and comfortable about climate change when every few months a new piece of alarming scientific evidence emerges.

For instance, in February, researchers demonstrated that the massive west Antarctic ice sheet, previously assumed to be stable, has probably started to collapse. In itself, this could raise sea levels by several metres.

Researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine estimate that global warming already causes 160,000 excess deaths per year from malnutrition, diarrhoea and malaria – the result of warmer temperatures, droughts, floods and storms.

And so, what shall we do? The climate-change sceptics say we should act according to research that indicates there’ll be no real problem. The mainstream climate scientists say we should act according to the bulk of research, and this indicates that there is a real problem. Nine of the ten hottest years on record have been in the last decade.

But why aren’t we seriously considering the most alarming results, which suggest that our great-grandkids could inherit a largely hostile planet? For instance, the most comprehensive climate modelling to date is being performed on about 100,000 home computers. (For info about putting your PC onto the task, visit [www.climateprediction.net](http://www.climateprediction.net))

Current results from this project suggest that we are already committed to global temperature increases of somewhere between 1.9°C and 11.5°C. We’re not even properly planning for a 2°C rise, but 11°C would flood many of the world’s cities and unleash tropical storms across the globe.

Sure, the scariest results are outliers, but so are the relatively comforting predictions upon which our government seemingly bases its policy. Must our survival depend on a coin toss?

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