

## **Stern Review, Climate Change: Scientific Evidence?**

Further Note by David Heigham

*April 2006*

Ian Byatt and his eminent colleagues pour doubt on the existing scientific evidence. The Royal Society treats this evidence as authoritative.

With all due respect to both, the only appropriate attitude for policy makers to the scientific evidence is that of an excellent GP of a generation ago. He followed medical scientific findings avidly, and lamented that he did not know which half of what the scientists were telling him would be proved wrong in the next 20 years. He treated his patients on the basis of the best evidence available, and avoided drastic treatments whenever he could do so without putting the patient at greater risk.

Considered as a basis for policy, the present state of the scientific evidence on the principal points of climate change is:

- Long odds-on that large scale climate warming is occurring.
- Long, but not quite so long, odds-on that if we reduce greenhouse gas emissions we will slow the warming process. (Whether the warming is caused by anthropogenic emissions is not strictly relevant to policy; policy makers want to know what is the likely effect of reducing emissions and the scientific step from one to the other is subject to uncertainties. To use a metaphor: stopping digging may well result in the hole getting no deeper, but it just might be that subsidence will continue.)
- Even discounting human proclivity to identify undesirable effects of change before noticing the desirable consequences, there are odds-on likelihoods of substantial undesirable effects on the welfare of the coming 2 or 3 human generations.
- Accumulating evidence of likelihoods of drastic changes which may be self-reinforcing. (Not “irreversible” changes. There is presumptive evidence that they have reversed in the past.)
- Long odds-on that much of the detailed scientific findings will look different in 10 or 20 years, plus odds-against possibilities that that one or more of the first three points above will be invalidated.

As my GP might have put it, it would be silly to assume that we have a definitive prognosis of the condition of the climate, let alone a full diagnosis; but idiotic to put off prescribing suitable treatment to reduce suffering.

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