

Hidden doom of climate change

- by: *Clive Hamilton*
- From: *The Sunday Mail (Qld)*
- September 09, 2007 12:00AM



CHAIN REACTION: A 3C-4C rise in global temperatures could destroy coral species in the Great Barrier Reef and most of the marine life in it. *Source: The Courier-Mail*

POLITICAL actors typically engage in exaggeration to advance their agenda, and in the case of climate change the situation is no different.

The Labor Party exaggerated the likely damage due to the introduction of the GST, despite the fact that Paul Keating wanted to introduce just such a tax. The Coalition is exaggerating the economic effects of Labor's industrial relations policy.

Social-welfare campaigners often overstate the extent of poverty, hoping that appreciation of the magnitude of the problem will spur the public or politicians into doing something about it.

Environmental campaigns are no different. Environmentalists have often overstated the effects of environmental decline.

The risks of nuclear power, though considerable, have been exaggerated. The dangers of urban air pollution have been inflated.

The threats posed by DDT, lead pollution and pesticides, while significant, have usually been presented as much scarier than they actually are.

And the likely effects of genetically modified crops have been blown out of proportion.

The purpose of political exaggeration is to stimulate stronger emotional responses, usually fear, and make us more likely to act in the way desired. When your opponents are busily exaggerating the other way, the pressure is almost irresistible.

Yet there is one area where the opposite is the case, where the protagonists on one side have for years systematically understated the dangers.

Climate scientists have been afraid to talk about the true extent of the dangers of global warming. Those who have looked closely at what the scientists are concluding believe that the truth is so frightening that, if told, it will stop people from acting, rather than stimulate them to do more.

There is a cavernous gap between the urgency of the warnings from science and the political response to it. The concern among the public is way ahead of that of our politicians but it remains true that the public simply has no grasp of the magnitude of the disaster that looms ahead of us.

Nowhere in the rich world, except perhaps in the US, is this radical disconnect greater than in Australia.

In June the journal *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* carried a paper by James Hansen and others clarifying the danger of human-induced climate change. Hansen is widely recognised as the world's most eminent climate scientist.

The authors concluded that an additional warming of 1C above the year-2000 level will have effects that "may be highly disruptive", using expected sea-level rise as the best indicator of danger.

A 1C increase above the 2000 level means an average temperature increase of about 1.7C above the pre-industrial age average. The authors' analysis suggests that this "tipping point" is almost locked in.

They acknowledge that avoiding this danger point is "still technically feasible" but in practice keeping global temperatures from rising by less than 2C is now beyond us.

As industrial activity in China and India increases, the effects of global warming will be intensified.

In short, we are already past the point that locks in 2C of warming, and will without question go well beyond it. Even a 3C rise is looking very hard to avoid.

Very few people, even among environmentalists, have truly faced up to what the science is telling us.

This is because the implications of 3C, let alone 4C or 5C, are so horrible that we look to any possible scenario to head it off, including the canvassing of "emergency" responses such as the suspension of democratic processes.

What does this mean for Australia? The prediction of impacts is not a sure science, but here are some of the best estimates from the CSIRO as to what a 3-4C global temperature increase would mean for Australia.

- A doubling of the number of very hot days (over 35C) in the eastern states.

- A doubling or trebling of deaths among older people due to heat stroke.
- Catastrophic mortality of coral species, including a 95 per cent decrease in the distribution of Great Barrier Reef species.
- Loss of more than half of the core habitat for eucalyptus species. Imagine our country with more than half of the gum trees gone.
- Possible 50 per cent fall in water flows in the Murray Darling Basin. We are already caught up in intractable fights over the water in the system.
- Substantial increases in extreme weather events, including cyclones, bushfires and storm tides.

In other words, this country will shift into a different and very unpleasant climate, and it will last for hundreds of years.

The story does not end there because climate scientists are now increasingly worried about the possibility of climate "tipping points".

In a recent paper titled *Scientific reticence and sea level rise*, Hansen discusses the traditional caution of scientists that has led them to downplay the risks of sea-level rise of several metres due to the collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet.

Hansen argues that scientists are more worried about being accused of "crying wolf" than they are of being accused of "fiddling while Rome burns".

He discusses the pressures on scientists to be conservative, noting that journals are more likely to publish their papers if they are cautious and filled with caveats. He argues that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change consensus process naturally favours caution and understatement of dangers.

When the world's foremost climate scientist tells us that unless we act soon to sharply cut our emissions then we are near certain to experience a sea-level rise of several metres, I become very afraid . . . because I see little evidence that the world is willing to do anything like what is needed.

I was reminded of this by the reaction to a paper recently released by my institute on the need to begin tackling greenhouse gas emissions from aviation.

The paper made the perfectly reasonable point that, if we are aiming to cut our emissions by 60 per cent by 2050 – ALP policy – then if we do nothing about the extraordinary growth of aviation emissions, aeroplanes will account for our entire greenhouse gas emission allowances by 2050.

As there is no feasible technological solution to emissions from aviation, we must consider limiting the growth of the industry, beginning with a moratorium on airport expansions.

This argument is now accepted, in principle at least, in Europe, yet our paper sparked a series of attacks on us by the industry – notably Virgin Blue – and the Federal Government and the Labor Party.

Their world view is so inseparably bound up with continued growth that they are immune to the facts; they will not countenance them. They will not even propose an alternative analysis. They just deny it could be true.

In the climate change debate, while the dangers of global warming have been deliberately understated, those opposed to taking action have engaged in absurd exaggeration of the economic costs of cutting emissions.

The Prime Minister, various ministers and the fossil fuel lobby have for years claimed that cutting emissions would be economically ruinous, cause massive job losses and destroy our international competitiveness. None of these claims is backed by credible evidence and can easily be shown to be false.

Hansen reminds us that taking measures to reduce the risks of these catastrophic events will require us to begin immediately to shift to a radically different energy and greenhouse gas emissions path. At present such a shift is politically unimaginable; yet if we do not imagine it very soon, then generations to come will pay very dearly indeed.

Clive Hamilton is executive director of the Australia Institute. His latest book is "Scorcher: The Dirty Politics of Climate Change" (Black Inc., RRP \$29.95). He will be a guest at the Brisbane Writers Festival on Saturday.