

OPINION & ANALYSIS

CLIMATE CHANGE/Alex Hetherington

Hot air and global warming

ALIVELY debate on the authenticity of climate change has recently been taking place in a Cape daily newspaper between a vocal environmental "activist" and a one-time nuclear industry researcher.

The activist accuses the researcher of writing "rubbish", while the researcher claims the activist to be blind to historic climatic variances that cast doubt on the human-induced nature of global warming.

The interchange would be funny if it were not that climate change is too serious an issue to be hijacked by opposing extremist viewpoints.

Climate change is not a zero-sum game and a middle ground of reason needs to be forged — where rational thought can guide action at both government and private sector level. However, in finding that middle ground, certain challenges must be faced.

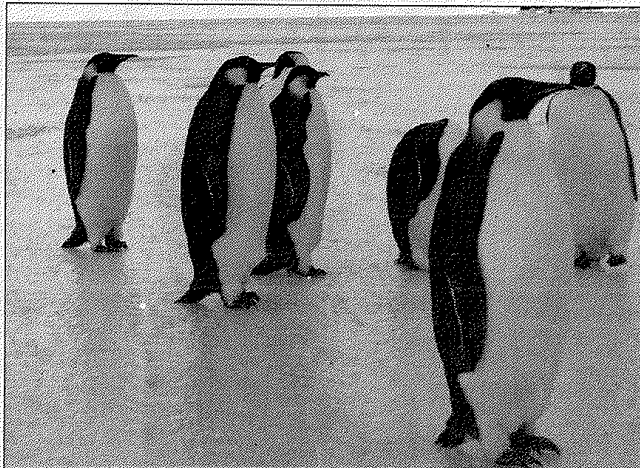
Beyond the extremist rhetoric lies the fact that we are still substantially informed by an uncertain science that describes the consequences of a heating planet with disclaimers such as "more likely"; "could rise"; or, "is likely to lead to...". This is a long way from the hard facts that government policy formulators or business decision makers feel comfortable with.

A second problem is the fact that human beings as a species are moving into an unprecedented climatic period. We do not know how much blame we can place at the door of carbon-releasing economic growth, nor do we know exactly how much of a problem climate change will ultimately be. Will those threats, for example, of a 6m rise in sea level over the next two centuries come true, as a Princeton University scientist has recently warned?

The critical fact is that policies and decisions do need to be made and certain home truths are coming in to play.

Before the industrial revolution, the atmospheric content of carbon dioxide, the principal greenhouse gas, was 270 parts per million (ppm). Today it is recorded at 380ppm, and corresponds with a global warming period that has resulted in the past 10 years being the warmest since official records were kept midway through the 19th century.

This warming, in turn, corresponds with significant melting of both the Arctic and Antarctic icecaps, thereby



▲ A global warming period has resulted in the past ten years being the warmest since official records were kept midway in the nineteenth century. This warming corresponds with significant melting of both the Arctic and Antarctic icecaps, influencing global current streams and associated weather patterns. ▼

influencing global current streams and associated weather patterns. It is a closed planetary system that we live in and any speeding up of natural processes, such as the rapid release of carbon dioxide in the burning of coal and other fossil fuels, will have an effect.

It is the response to these realities that demand rational and pragmatic thought. Even the Economist, a journal known for its resistance to any unnecessary costs to governments and economies, acknowledges that climate change is now of such a nature that a mixture of political will and technological fixes is required. Another way of reading this is that now is the time to make the necessary policy and business decisions.

A mixture of carrot and stick is surely needed but the fundamental questions remain of how much, and in what form?

Like the extremists, the global policy makers appear to be separating into two rhetorical camps. The US and Australia claim the incumbent global treaty to combat climate change, the Kyoto Protocol, with its binding emission reduction targets for industrialised nations, is too costly to their economies.

US Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman recently re-emphasised the US call for

private sector solutions to runaway emissions, being quoted in The Guardian as saying: "I believe that the people who run the private sector, who run these companies, they do have children, they do have grandchildren, they do live and breathe in the world."

As tongue in cheek as it might sound, the focus on future generations is profound and, more than any other reason, should be what sharpens the resolve of all concerned.

Yet, without well-set emission reduction targets, I would argue that Bodman and his Bush- and Howard-administration colleagues might just be answering to their grandchildren.

Despite longstanding awareness of climate change and its effects (the Kyoto Protocol was signed in 1997 after five years of negotiation), greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise alarmingly.

In addition, there appears to be a direct correlation between non-adherence to Kyoto and national increases in emissions. According to the World Resources Institute, greenhouse gas emissions in the US increased 13% from 1990-2002, while Australia recorded a 22% increase.

In contrast, the EU, a Kyoto signatory,

has seen a small decline in its emissions during the same period. This is led by the UK and Germany, who reduced their emissions 15% and 19% respectively.

Clearly, the incentives of emission targets can work.

While Kyoto signatories have committed to negotiations for post-2012 emission targets, these need to be strengthened and focused. As the world's largest emitter, the US needs to come back into the target-setting fold and the growing economies of China (the second-largest emitter) and India need to accept future targets for themselves.

Africa, we are told, will be hardest hit by the consequences of climate change and, as the continent's largest emitter, SA should also subscribe to target-setting, combined with a dogged determination to ensure policies such as its new Air Quality Act are effective.

Other policy measures include promoting the harnessing of renewable energy associated with wind, water and solar sources. More contentious, but necessary for short- to medium-term gains in emission reductions, are cleaner coal technologies and nuclear energy.

By capping emission levels and promoting alternative energy sources, the scene is set for the private sector to respond to climate change in the way it knows best — economic efficiencies.

Carbon trading is one tool that is gaining traction.

Within their immediate environment, corporates need to publicly acknowledge their contribution to the climate change problem, and promote their awareness as a core business principle. Such acknowledgement will lead their mitigation, adaptation and energy conservation policies and, with all externalities considered, ultimately prove to be financially astute.

These are realistic policy and corporate responses devoid of dangerous, emotive language. They are also responses that, if taken, will in time erase the doubt and uncertainty that surround climate change.

The result will be a balanced approach, allowing continued monitoring of the climate change phenomena and creating a solid base from which future actions can be launched, if necessary.

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