

Climate Change Issues: A Dissenting Voice

The text which follows formed the basis for a brief presentation by David Henderson to a conference held on 22 April 2009 at the Said Business School, Oxford University. The subject of the conference was 'Beyond Kyoto – Green Innovation and Enterprise in the 21st Century'.

Introduction

When I received the invitation to take part in today's proceedings, my first thought was that the organisers had made a mistake. Looking at the conference agenda, it seemed obvious that I would not fit in: I would appear as an outsider, an anomaly, a cross between a lone wolf and a black sheep. In thanking the organisers, I pointed this out.

However, it proved that the mistake was mine, not theirs: they actually wanted to ensure that a dissenting view, a non-subscribing voice, would be heard today. I am pleased to have this rare and unexpected opportunity; and in exploiting it, I shall take the whole of the seven minutes that have been suggested for me as my allotted time, starting now.

Presentation

My dissent from received opinion is wide-ranging, albeit not total: most of my fleece, though not all, is jet black. I question the stated aim of this conference, and the beliefs and presumptions that underlie it.

To begin with, and looking ahead to the next session, I dissent from the widely accepted view that businesses should now embrace the doctrine of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR, upper case) and pursue the goal of sustainable development.

I believe that business enterprises should indeed act responsibly, and that they should be seen to act responsibly. However, I do not believe that responsible corporate behaviour today should be identified with endorsing, and giving effect to, CSR. In a number of writings, I have argued against CSR on two grounds:

- first, that it rests on a view of the world that is seriously misleading; and
- second, that its general adoption by businesses would on balance do harm, possibly substantial harm.

'But', you could say to me, 'CSR is not the main issue. Surely you don't go so far as to question the accepted view that businesses today should play a leading part in creating a green, low-carbon economy?' Actually, I do go so far: I do indeed question that accepted view.

In explaining why I take dissent to such lengths, I take as a point of departure a speech made last month by our Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Ed Miliband, to a gathering which had much the same theme as this meeting: it was a Low Carbon Industrial Summit.

In his address Mr Miliband said:

‘the science says we need to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 80 percent to avoid the most catastrophic and irreversible effects of climate change’.

This assertion is not accurate. Like other high-level statements that I could quote, it presents as scientifically established fact what is in reality no more than a strongly held belief. Admittedly, that belief is shared by many scientists, some of whom may well have assisted in drafting Miliband’s speech and others of its kind. But it is not the case that the formidable emissions targets which the British and other governments have adopted or proposed, and the stated rationale for those targets, reflect agreed and conclusive scientific findings.

The climate system is one of extraordinary complexity, and its workings are far from being well understood. On many aspects and issues, as one would expect, there is a range, a spectrum, of expert views and beliefs. It is misleading to refer, as Miliband did, to ‘the science’, as though everything that matters was now finally agreed. His wording reflects views that are held across only a part of the scientific spectrum, a part which he treats, uncritically and misleadingly, as though it were the whole. In this he is not alone.

‘But’, you could now say to me, ‘granting, for the sake of argument only, that Miliband and others may be going rather too far, surely there is clear scientific evidence that human-induced global warming presents a serious problem which has to be dealt with. That is the reality which governments have recognised and responded to, and enlightened businesses – prudent businesses - should do the same’.

You could go further. You could add that evidence as to the reality of, and the threat posed by, human-induced global warming has emerged from a well established official expert advisory process, and in particular, within that process, from the series of massive Assessment Reports issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC). You could go on to remind me that in 2007 the IPCC was a joint recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and that its role and work have been commended by scientific academies across the world.

How do I respond to these arguments? To begin with, I agree that there exists what I call an official policy consensus. I also agree that this established policy consensus is largely based on the scientific advice which governments have commissioned and received over a period of some 20 years. Although I question the notion of a scientific consensus, I think one can speak here of prevailing scientific opinion which a non-scientist like me is not well placed to reject. However, this is not the whole story.

I believe that governments across the world are mishandling climate change issues. I question the content, the orientation, and in particular the basis and rationale, of current policies to curb emissions of (so-called) ‘greenhouse gases’.

As to the *content* of policy, the measures that have been put into effect too often take the costly form of what my friend Martin Wolf, in his FT column, has aptly termed ‘a host of interventionist gimmicks’. There is a strong case for relying wholly, or at any rate very largely, on a general price-based incentive in the form of a carbon tax or charge.

As to the *orientation* of current policies, it is too presumptive. Governments are taking too little account of the huge uncertainties that remain. It is a hypothesis only, not an established fact, that the climate can be tuned and equilibrated by judicious control of emissions; and it is imprudent for governments and international agencies today to endorse ambitious programmes, and fix specific quantitative targets, which purport to cover decades or even centuries to come.

As to the *basis* of current policies, I have come to believe that the official expert advisory process, and the IPCC process within it, are seriously flawed. This in fact is my main distinctive message today.

Two related forms of evidence have brought me to this view. They represent findings on my part, not presuppositions.

First is the evidence that work which the IPCC and its member governments have drawn on has been marred by professional deficiencies which have gone unacknowledged and unremedied. Second is the evidence that the influential expert advisory processes have been throughout, and continue to be, subject to chronic and pervasive bias.

From this assessment I draw a straightforward conclusion for policy. In a subject area where so much remains uncertain or unknown, today's confident and far-reaching policy settings should not be taken as given. Policy should be evolutionary, not presumptive; and its evolution should be linked to a process of inquiry, review and advice which is more open, more balanced and more professionally watertight than is now the case. Rather than asserting like Mr Miliband that 'the science' is 'settled', and building costly, radical and supposedly permanent action programmes on that unwarranted presumption, governments should take steps to ensure that they and their citizens are more fully and more objectively informed and advised.