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NZ Baptist

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Visionnetwork's 'Clearing the Air' forum July 16-17 was a great exercise in viewing the phantom behemoth that is climate change from many useful angles.

The stated goal was to 'provide a forum which connects science and faith on the issue of climate change and provide the framework for a joint statement by national church leaders.' It was precipitated by the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) that took effect July 1 and the ongoing debate around climate change.

Glyn Carpenter, who heads up visionnetwork, and Unitec Institute of Technology associate professor Jonathan Leaver convened and helped organise the forum.

Attendance varied from about 40 to 55. Most of those who came are involved in either church leadership, such as the Salvation Army's public policy staff, or work in science or policy realms affected by climate change issues.

The variety of expertise and views was broad, especially considering that the platform assumed a Christian worldview. Speakers included Matthew Flannagan, adjunct lecturer at Laidlaw College; Ralph Sims, director of the Centre for Energy Research at Massey University; James Renwick, principal climate scientist at NIWA; Ian Wishart, editor of *Investigate* magazine; Jonathan Boston, director of the Institute of Policy Studies at Victoria University; Barry Brill, president of NZ Climate Science Coalition (pictured); Andy Reisinger, senior research fellow at NZ Climate Change Research Institute, Victoria University; Liza Storey, research officer at the International Global Change Centre, University of Waikato; Stephen Tollestrup, executive director of Tear Fund; and Ralph Sims, director of the Centre for Energy Research at Massey University.

Abstracts of the presentations are available at www.visionnetwork.org.nz ^[1]. A more detailed summary and the consensus of the church leaders involved is also expected to appear there soon.

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To sum up visionnetwork's climate change forum: God gave us stewardship of his Earth, and we should care for it to the best of our ability.

That statement is about all that fits into the eye of a storm of research, information, projections

and opinion. The majority of the attendees and speakers are of the now traditional view that global warming is a human-induced crisis in the making, although even among them the extent and remedy are still up for debate. Others are increasingly sceptical that we are facing a crisis at all.

The presentations ranged from data-heavy (the majority) to emotional and anecdotal. One of the latter was given by Tear Fund's Stephen Tollestrup. He made the point that the developing world is not as well equipped to mitigate environmental changes and gave striking examples of famine, conflicts and urban overpopulation. None of these are new, of course, but he suggested that climate change was exacerbating all of them.

Conjecture swiftly turned to fantasy, however. He said that the conflict in Sudan, for instance, was due to shrinking eco-systems, not religion. (If he had evidence of that, he should have shared. The fact that Sudan's Islamic government in the north recently waged a 21-year jihad on Christian and animist minorities in the oil-rich south has never been attributed to weather before.)

Most presenters could not be faulted for lack of graphs and charts, however.

Jonathan Boston, director of policy studies at Victoria University of Wellington, advocated a better-safe-than-sorry approach that involves charging premiums on energy to decrease our use. His concern is that steps to reverse climate change are losing traction, and he blamed media coverage of 'climategate' and scepticism in general for weakening public resolve.

In the words of his recent academic paper, *Evidence of Denial: The Case of Climate Change*, sceptics 'have endeavoured to thwart the introduction of effective policy measures to curb GHG emissions.'

After his presentation he injected some drama into the otherwise staid proceedings, calling out objections from the bleachers at speaker Barry Brill, a former MP who was Minister of Energy and Science & Technology. Barry, who now heads up NZ Climate Science Coalition, waited till the outburst was over, magnanimously agreed with Jonathan's point, overturned it with a further comment, then carried on with his presentation. Jonathan grabbed his coat and walked out the door.

The forum can't have been that hard for someone who passionately wants us to defeat climate change to watch. Barry Brill and Ian Wishart, author of *Air Con*, were outnumbered four-to-one by speakers who assume that there is enough evidence that global warming is a serious problem, one that mankind has contributed to, and that it can be atoned for with economic sacrifices.

However Barry brought issues to the table that, until quite recently, the mainstream media never broached - possibly because they simply aren't headline material. After a decade or more of media focus on global warming predictions and probabilities, it was refreshing to hear someone talk about what is definitely known and what actually is being done. Barry's presentation and a couple others like it were the ones that stuck with me.

Barry pointed out that China and India - encompassing half of the world's population - are industrialising at a fast pace and increasing CO₂ emissions exponentially. Neither government will agree to any of the economic restraints that cutting emissions bring, and they are on track

to becoming the world's largest polluters. Realistically, New Zealand's commitment to action (symbolic or otherwise) isn't catching on where it matters.

And assuming the Earth continues to warm, Barry pointed out that many areas stand to benefit from side effects such as longer growing seasons and increased agricultural output ? it would not be an unmitigated disaster.

He also sees hope in new technology and sustainable energy, and said that decarbonisation is happening in developed countries even without the force of economic disincentives. The costs related to accelerating use of new technology is expensive and will outweigh any benefit unless the most pessimistic predictions on climate change and the most optimistic view of our ability to stop it are true.

He also said there is a ?moral imperative to avoid waste where we can,? affirming a theme common to all the speakers. However, in his view, waste could apply to tactics such as carbon taxes that inhibit the economy and, by extension, our ability to offer tangible help to those who need it.

Barry said that our efforts should be thrown into adaptation, which is both necessary and achievable. He pointed out that the average temperature in Singapore is more than 20 degrees higher than it is in Helsinki, yet both places are prosperous.

While Barry presented a conservative way to address the issue, Ian Wishart's presentation undermined the common wisdom directing more extreme climate change policies. Ian said that, until five years ago, he too had believed in a global warming crisis, but the more research he did the less convinced he was. Ian published the controversial No. 1 seller *Air Con* in 2009, subtitled ?The seriously inconvenient truth about global warming.?

?I'm not going to turn around and say the Earth hasn't warmed up,? he said. ?It has, we're coming out of a mini ice age. But the degree to which it has is up for debate.?

He tackled ongoing misrepresentation of facts, such as the ?Takuu fabrication.? *There Once was an Island*, a Kiwi documentary that purports to show the first effects of climate change on the Takuu atoll, premiered in New Zealand on July 18.

?Tapuu has issues that have nothing to do with global warming,? Ian said. Among them, tectonic plate activity (it sits on the edge of the Indo-Australian and Pacific plates) and dynamite and chemical fishing. On many islands, locals end up destroying coral reefs by dynamite fishing and harvesting the coral. This in turn removes their protection from the open sea.

?It is human induced climate change,? Ian said, referring to waves that the documentary shows swamping houses, ?but it is not CO₂, it is not rising sea levels.?

Ian affirmed that temperatures and sea levels have risen, but he did contest the rate. Ian's data included scientists' estimations of global temperatures going back millennia that show regular heating and cooling trends, and he said we're experiencing heating comparable to 1000 years ago.

While ?climategate? has cast doubt on the impartiality of scientists who disseminate the data,

Ian pointed out that isn't their only problem. Among others, many modern temperature stations are in urban heat islands. Pictures of stations at the end of an airport runway and over asphalt summarized the challenges of accurate data.

For those who believe there is enough accurate information to necessitate action, Ian advised caution in what they 'yoke up to.' The UN wants to become the central scene for policing humanity, he said, and he sees the fact that three quarters of its members are dictatorships as significant.

'Let's not use climate change as the Trojan horse that brings this in,' Ian said.

His underlying theme was that accurate data must precede action, and that's something we don't have.

For data, Andy Reisinger, senior research fellow at Victoria University's Climate Change Research Institute, was the in-house expert. He began his presentation by saying that his mantra is 'science can't tell you what to do or how to live.'

Having put what he was about to say in perspective, he concisely explained the necessary work CO₂ does to keep the planet warm and the correlation between CO₂ levels in the atmosphere and global temperatures. He believes that the rate of change is the greatest in the past 10,000 years.

Andy said that short-term changes to emissions will not have immediate effects but should in the long run. As for the results of a warming trend, he agreed that some areas would benefit from better food production and water supply while others would suffer.

The limits of manageable climate change are a value judgment that science can't make, he said 'science can just provide a range of likely outcomes.'

Among the audience were two people who are among the first to feel the effects of both climactic and economic change. Neil and Esther Henderson are sheep and beef farmers outside of Gisborne. They began a group called Climate Realists a year ago with 50 people and now have more than 500 signed up to receive their e-letters.

They collected over 10,000 signatures prior to the UN's Copenhagen climate conference last year, petitioning the government not to sign any agreements, and have organized protests against the ETS.

Neil, whose family has farmed their land since 1892, said that he once believed in global warming but, like Ian, the more he looks into it the less convinced he becomes.

Esther, who is originally from Auckland and attended the old Mangere Baptist Church, said that the ETS scheme in particular has an impact on farmers, who are now labeled 'polluters.'

'It really grates with us,' she said, 'because our animals do what God made them to do naturally.'

During the panel discussion, she told panelists that their only way to offset the emission taxes they will be liable for from 2015 is to plant trees, but that the credit earned from those trees is good only for a limited number of years and must be paid back if the trees are cut down.

Given that they have finite land and can't raise livestock if it's covered with trees, she asked, "How do we feed people?"

Jonathan Boston, who repeatedly advocated increasing costs to change people's behaviour, responded that "we must not think that food is special."

Differing opinions often seemed to come down to differing levels of trust – levels of trust in scientists, in bureaucrats, in governments' ability to enact change, and trust in humanity's ability to adapt and develop new technology. Given the vast number of factors that influence climate and the variety of opinions the research has spawned, any prediction about the future must rely on faith of one sort or another.

In the discussion time, one elderly clergyman likened today's scientist, emerging from his office with a laptop under an arm, to an Old Testament prophet bearing an infallible word.

Perhaps once they can forecast next weekend's weather with God-breathed accuracy they'll have a more faithful following.

Further information:

New Zealand Christian Network (visionnetwork) is dedicated to gathering people of common conviction ... to speak to the church, our communities and the nation with a reasoned, carefully researched voice.

www.visionnetwork.org.nz [1]

A Rocha – an international Christian nature conservation organisation and NZ charitable trust. Its projects are often cross-cultural with a community emphasis and focus on science, research and practical conservation.

www.arocha.org.nz [2]

Climate Realists – grass roots discussion and action.

www.climaterealists.org.nz [3]

Climate Science Coalition – a group of Kiwi professionals with expertise in environmental and other arenas who are critical of man-made climate change theories.

www.climatescience.org.nz [4]

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Links

[1] <http://www.visionnetwork.org.nz>

[2] <http://www.arocha.org.nz>

[3] <http://www.climaterealists.org.nz>

[4] <http://www.climatescience.org.nz>

[5] <https://climaterealists.org.nz/taxonomy/term/1>