

Letter to Kurt Lambeck from Don Aitken, Sunday, June 7 2009

Dear Kurt,

It was a coincidence that I started to write a set of comments about your review of Ian Plimer's book when The Canberra Times told me of your Queen's Birthday honour, for which I congratulate you. I'll make a further tiny comment about that at the end.

I didn't hear your talk, but I have read the transcript, and make some comments about it, given Robyn Williams' remark, in introducing you, that 'the stakes couldn't be higher'. I might have simply read, shrugged and passed on, had it not been for your comment that 'Heaven and Earth is not a work of science, it is an opinion of an author who happens to be a scientist'. I puzzled over that line. It's the kind of remark I would make about the IPCC authors' statement that they were 99 per cent certain, or whatever the figure was, that the warming we were having was the result of human activity. That was not science, if you will allow me to say so. It was the opinion of scientists. My own feeling is that the claim would have been better expressed as 'We are pretty sure that...'

Indeed, the IPCC reports, the last two of which I have read, seem to me very similar, in that respect, to Heaven and Earth. There is abundant use of refereed journal articles, and that's fine. The science there described is used for the purposes of the IPCC. And that's fine too. We use what others have done for our own purposes. What then distinguishes the 4AR from Heaven and Earth? Ian Plimer uses what he can find to build a case, and so do the IPCC authors. Both think they are right. I can't myself see a difference.

I agree with you (and I am sure that Ian Plimer would too) that 'climate change' is such a complex process that no single individual can do the work necessary to explain it all. But that is why we use the work of others, knowing that we cannot do everything, but hoping that we have made a contribution — and knowing also that later someone else will come and show faults in what we have done. I see no reason to suppose that the IPCC process is necessary, and you have quite frankly recognised some of the faults in it. There are many others, and they don't give me great confidence in the output.

Nor do I see any need for consensus — and that is the second remark you made that prompted this comment. As I see it, science is never about reaching consensus — that's a political process. Science is about formulating hypotheses and testing them experimentally. Inasmuch as there is consensus about anything (the kind that allows textbooks to be written) it too is understood to be subject to review and dislodgment if the evidence points elsewhere. And Plimer's book offers abundant examples of that kind of evidence.

You argue that non-consensus views 'get tested in the peer-reviewed literature, and if the hypothesis stands up to this probing, it becomes incorporated in subsequent analyses'. I have two comments here. The first is that there is little evidence that 'the IPCC process' has taken seriously the work by scientists that does not support the AGW position. There is, for example, no chapter or section where the various inadequacies of the IPCC's own argument, and the contrary evidence indicated in other peer-reviewed articles, are discussed and dealt with. It is though nothing like that needs to be done. The same could be said about your later criticisms of Ian Plimer's choice of references. The supposed comment to an honours student you provide later could, it seems to me, be levelled with great accuracy at the IPCC's own reports. And that is why Plimer's book (which I have also read, from cover to cover) has to be dealt with seriously, not dismissed as though, as a single scientist, he can't possibly know anything about something so complex as climate.

Third, 'the concept that hundreds of researchers are conspiring to defraud the world's policy-makers' is a straw man. It does not appear, to my recollection, in Ian Plimer's book. I certainly don't believe in such a conspiracy. I do equate AGW with 'conventional wisdom', and I think that

he would too.

Fourth, the IPCC claims, and you endorse the claim, that 'Only the addition of greenhouse gases lead[s] to a satisfactory explanation of what has been observed...' I have never been able to find a convincing reason for that claim. I thought that Ian Plimer's book provided a series of explanations of why such a claim is not necessary. Again, I think that this is the nub of it: given that we are warming up from a past cool period, why is the AGW argument necessary to explain the warming?

Finally, your gong is well-merited for all sorts of reasons, but I hope you will allow me to say, in offering congratulations, that I would not put your contributions to public policy in this area ahead of your other claims for recognition. I am deeply concerned about the future of humanity too, and have the appropriate assemblage of children and grandchildren to worry about. In my view we are only at the beginning of an understanding of 'climate science', and to rush in and propose quite extraordinary public policies, which would greatly reduce our own quality of life and condemn the world's poor to a continuation of their lot, on the basis of arguments from science which are not well demonstrated by observation or experiment, does not endear me to the IPCC and those who run it. I regret that you have moved the Academy in support of these measures, and wish you had not done so, given the great standing that the Academy has in our society.

With best wishes,

Don