

Global Warming Consensus

According to media reports there is no scientific controversy about global warming: all scientists agree that the globe is warming and that humans are responsible for it. No one dissents. There is, in other words, a scientific consensus. **Is such a consensus a good thing?** Why are there consensuses? **What exactly is being agreed upon and by whom?** We need to consider these and other questions before committing wholeheartedly to the widespread contention that everyone agrees about the causes, the extent and the consequences of the global warming. These questions are important because the so called consensus is used by the press and by politicians to justify new laws and the consequent heavy burden on society, all this based on the doubtful effects of the alleged global warming process. An alternative use of the funds could make a big difference to the quality of life of millions of people.

Is consensus a good thing?

In his book *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus*, the philosopher Nicholas Rescher defined consensus as a “condition of intellectual uniformity, a homogeneity of thought and opinion.” He argued that:

the impetus to consensus unquestionably resonates to the human predicament: it reflects our penchant for conformity and our deep-rooted inclination to accept what others do, so as to achieve the comforts of solidarity and companionship... Finding ourselves in a condition of agreement with others is unquestionably a source of comfort.

The drive to consensus is not necessarily a good thing. **Intellectual uniformity is frequently an impediment to creativity and innovation, and a sign of intellectual mediocrity.** Rescher noted that the “**realization of consensus involves a compromise among potentially divergent tendencies and thus tends to occupy ‘the middle ground’ where people are most easily brought together, but where, for that very reason, the element of creative, insightful innovation is likely to be missing.**” Irving L. Janis made a similar point in his classic book about decision making in groups, *Groupthink: Psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes*. He wrote that “when a group of people who respect each other’s opinions arrive at a unanimous view, each member is likely to feel that the belief must be true. This **reliance on consensual validation tends to replace individual critical thinking and reality-testing.**”

The Origin of Consensus

But if dissensus, or *lack* of agreement, increases creativity and innovation, and is best for the pursuit of scientific truths, what elements fuel the drive to consensus? Not the scientific method, clearly, because it is indifferent to the results of science. Rescher suggested that **what leads scientists to consensus is the “conformism imposed by promotion committees, funding agency appraisers, and peer review boards.”** Science is expensive and, consequently, scientists compete for funding. When funding agencies are biased towards one particular view, these agencies will fund research that corroborates that view. As a result, that view will spread – not because it is closer to the truth, or because it describes reality better than the alternatives, but because it is the only view that is funded.

Author: Sinai Waisberg

Version published on Oct.5.2008

But the consensus that seems to emerge is only illusory. Janis suggested several pressures that create this illusion. The following are particularly important:

(1) Self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member's inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counterarguments. (2) A shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent). (3) Direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members. (4) The emergence of self-appointed mindguards—members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.

Another reason for the spread of a particular view is that the media only relate certain types of things, such as environmental disasters and political scandals. Julian Simon argued, in *The Ultimate Resource 2*, that such distorted reporting is what might lead to a consensus:

Newspapers and television – the main source of notions about matters which people do not experience directly – are systematically misleading the public, even if unintentionally... the media carry stories about environmental scares, people become frightened, polls then reveal their worry, and the worry is then cited as support for policies to initiate action about the supposed scares, which then raise the level of public concern.

Consensus and Politics

Science is not conducted by committees, and voting is not a mechanism scientists use to discover new things. **Science is actually an antidemocratic institution. The opinion of the majority does not matter. What matters is experimentation and logical reasoning. So a consensus may only be related to politics** – not to the practice of science. Accordingly, many have noted that politicians, not scientists, are the ones most interested in establishing a consensus.

The scientist Richard S. Lindzen wrote:

Why, one might wonder, is there such insistence on scientific unanimity on the warming issue? After all, unanimity in science is virtually nonexistent on far less complex matters. Unanimity on an issue as uncertain as 'global warming' would be surprising and suspicious. Moreover, why are the opinions of scientists sought regardless of their field of expertise? Biologists and physicians are rarely asked to endorse some theory in high energy physics. Apparently, when one comes to 'global warming,' any scientist's agreement will do. The answer almost certainly lies in politics.

The link between global warming and politics becomes even more apparent when we note that the person most often associated with global warming is Al Gore, a politician (compare, for example, with these two pairs: the theory of relativity–Einstein, the theory of evolution–Darwin). According to the Wikipedia entry on Al Gore (viewed on 10/05/2008):

Al Gore was elected with 28 years of age and was involved in America politics for over three decades, serving first in the U.S. House Of Representatives (1977-85) and later in the U.S. Senate (1985-93) (representing Tennessee) before becoming vice president. Gore was the Democratic nominee for president in the presidential election (...) Gore is the recipient of a number of awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize (...) He won too a

Primetime Emmy Award for Current TV (2007), a Webby Award (2005) and a Academy Award (2007). He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree.

It is noteworthy that **in the realm of politics there is a strong tendency for consensus to be formed only among the worst elements of society.** The reasons for such were put forward by the economist Friedrich A. Hayek in *The Road to Serfdom*. The following passage contains the core of his argument:

In the first instance, it is probably true that, in general, the higher the education and intelligence of individuals become, the more their views and tastes are differentiated and the less likely they are to agree on a particular hierarchy of values. It is a corollary of this that if we wish to find a high degree of uniformity and similarity of outlook, we have to descend to the regions of lower moral and intellectual standards where the more primitive and “common” instincts and tastes prevail. This does not mean that the majority of people have low moral standards. It merely means that the largest group of people whose values are very similar are the people with low standards (...) Here comes in the second negative principle of selection: [a political dictator] will be able to obtain the support of all the docile and gullible, who have no strong convictions of their own but are prepared to accept a ready-made system of values if it is only drummed into their ears sufficiently loudly and frequently (...) It is in connection with the deliberate effort of the skilful demagogue to weld together a closely coherent and homogeneous body of supporters that the third and perhaps most important negative element of selection enters. It seems to be almost a law of human nature that it is easier for people to agree on a negative program – on the hatred of an enemy, on the envy of those better off than on any positive task. The contrast between the “we” and the “they”, the common fight against those outside the group, seems to be an essential ingredient in any creed which will solidly knit together a group for common action. It is consequently always employed by those who seek, not merely support of a policy, but the unreserved allegiance of huge masses (...)

Defining Consensus

Another important issue to consider when someone contends that there is a “scientific consensus on global warming” is what exactly is being agreed upon and by whom. Yet, in the heat of the political controversy, no one seems preoccupied with specifying the what and the whom. The validity of the contention, however, depends crucially on defining its terms appropriately.

Thomas Sowell wrote in *The Vision of the Anointed* that **“all statements are true if you are free to redefine their terms.”** If everyone is free to define the terms “scientist”, “consensus”, and “global warming” then it may well be that there is a “scientific consensus on global warming.” But if we are more careful in defining what these terms mean, then the contention that a consensus exists melts in the air.

Who are the scientists?

Who are the “scientists” that must agree so that the so called consensus be scientific? Do they have to have a PhD in climatology or meteorology or is a M.Sc. in arts or history of science enough? Are they required to have academic publications in relevant peer reviewed journals? Do they have to be associated with the IPCC, or is association with a nonprofit research institution enough? **It seems that all it takes for one to be counted as a scientist is to have a particular opinion about the state of the world, namely, that it is warming:** whoever agrees becomes a scientist. **Never in history there was such a low bar for being called a scientist.**

Author: Sinai Waisberg

Version published on Oct.5.2008

How many scientists?

How many scientists must agree for a consensus to be established? A consensus requires unanimity, or the “collective unanimous opinion of a number of persons” (Oxford English Dictionary), **not simply majority**. There may well be many scientists that think that the world is warming, and the causes, the extent and the consequences of this warming, but it is obviously not the case that everyone agrees. One consequence of using the term “consensus” wrongly, namely as a synonym of majority, is that the discussion is averted; it revolves around the sizes of two lists: one including scientists who think that the world is warming and human beings are responsible and another including scientists who think that the matter is not so simple. But lists and their size prove nothing! The only thing that **two** lists may indicate is that not all scientists agree, i.e., that there is no consensus. Be that as it may, it is impossible to compare two lists: By what criteria one list is better than another?

What is the agreement about?

Finally, what exactly is the agreement about? That the temperature of the earth has been increasing *and* that it will continue to increase? But when exactly did the increase begin and for how long will it last? Is CO₂ the sole reason for the increase? Will a decrease in the level of CO₂ necessarily lead to a cooling of the globe? Is it possible to control how much cooler the world will be? **Clearly the globe is not a room with a thermostat. The relationship between cause and effect is often intricate and always difficult to prove.** Yet, it is not obvious that by reversing the direction of the possible causes of global warming, the effects will disappear (i.e., the globe will cool). **Are there only negative consequences related to climate change, or are there positive ones as well? Are human beings responsible for global warming or are there other culprits?** What can and should we do about it?

Forecast and Planning

Predictions are never accurate; after all, they are predictions and not certainties. In his book *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb noted that:

Our forecast errors have traditionally been enormous and there may be no reasons for us to believe that we are suddenly in a more privileged position to see in the future compared to our blind predecessors. Forecasting by bureaucrats tends to be used for anxiety relief rather than for adequate policy makings.

William A Sherden (*The Fortune Sellers*) argued, moreover, that:

A fundamental barrier to forecasting technological change is the unpredictability of the evolution of technology. The path of technological progress is clouded by uncertainty and blocked by unknowns, impasses and dead ends; only occasionally is it illuminated by serendipitous events. Like most aspects of nature, the evolution of technology is so complex and uncertain that it is almost impossible to foresee break through innovations... we have tended, and still tend, to imagine future technologies as mere extensions of things that already exist.

About the same point, Taleb wrote:

Prediction requires knowing about technologies that will be discovered in the future... to understand the future to the point of being able to predict it, you need to incorporate elements from this future itself.

Computational models are hard to define and develop; there are many variables and uncertainties. It is, thus, absurd to consider that we can predict the future of the earth, its climate or the consequences of our interference with it. Apart from all the uncertainties of long-range weather forecasting, other uncertainties need to be added, in particular those of long-range economic forecasting, long-range population forecasting, and introduction of new technologies. In sum, 20-year projections about the state of the earth's climate are as good as guesses. **So, even with the more powerful computers, it is unreasonable to believe that models show us the future.**

So, given all the inaccuracy that characterize the study of the climate, whenever one is intent in planning or making protocols it is necessary to consider very carefully the costs and benefits of our choices.

A final note refers to the use of the word scenario. The word was omitted on purpose. Scenario is an imagined sequence of events, especially any of several detailed plans or possibilities (New Webster's Encyclopedia Dictionary). It is possible to create a scenario about anything (movies do it all the time). Significantly, scenarios do not require proof. Given certain beliefs about the climate, it is easy to create a scenario of how the world will look like as a result of, for example, a 50 degree Fahrenheit increase in temperature. However, this scenario meaningless: it is only the scenario of a movie.