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Mass Death Dies Hard

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When you tell people once too often that the missing extra heat is hiding in the ocean, they will switch over to watch Game of Thrones, where the dialogue is less ridiculous and all the threats come true. The proponents of man-made climate catastrophe asked us for so many leaps of faith that they were bound to run out of credibility in the end.

Now that they finally seem to be doing so, it could be a good time for those of us who have never been convinced by all those urgent warnings to start warning each other that we might be making a comparably senseless tactical error if we expect the elastic cause of the catastrophists, and all of its exponents, to go away in a hurry.

I speak as one who knows nothing about the mathematics involved in modelling non-linear systems. But I do know quite a lot about the mass media, and far too much about the abuse of language. So I feel qualified to advise against any triumphalist urge to compare the apparently imminent disintegration of the alarmist cause to the collapse of a house of cards. Devotees of that fond idea haven't thought hard enough about their metaphor. A house of cards collapses only with a sigh, and when it has finished collapsing all the cards are still there.

Although the alarmists might finally have to face that they will not get much more of what they want on a policy level, they will surely, on the level of their own employment, go on wanting their salaries and prestige. To take a conspicuous if ludicrous case, the Australian climate star Tim Flannery will probably not, of his own free will, shrink back to the position conferred by his original metier, as an expert on the extinction of the giant wombat. He is far more likely to go on being, and wishing to be, one of the mass media's mobile oracles about climate. While that possibility continues, it will go on being dangerous to stand between him and a TV camera. If the giant wombat could have moved at that speed, it would still be with us.

The mere fact that few of Flannery's predictions have ever come even remotely true need not be enough to discredit him. The same fact, in the case of America's Professor Ehrlich, has left him untouched ever since he predicted that the world would soon run out of copper. In those days, when our current phase of the long discussion about man's attack on nature was just beginning, he predicted mass death by extreme cold. Lately he predicts mass death by extreme heat. But he has always predicted mass death by extreme something, and he is always Professor Ehrlich.

Actually, a more illustrative starting point for the theme of the permanently imminent climatic

apocalypse might be taken as 3 August 1971, when the Sydney Morning Herald announced that the Great Barrier Reef would be dead in six months. After six months the reef had not died, but it has been going to die almost as soon as that ever since; making it a strangely durable emblem for all those who have wedded themselves to the notion of climate catastrophe.

The most exalted of all the world's predictors of reef death, President Obama, has still not seen the reef even now but he promises to go there one day when it is well again. Assurances that it has never really been sick won't be coming from his senior science adviser John Holdren. In the middle of 2016 some of the long-term experts on reef death began admitting that they had all been overdoing the propaganda.

After almost half a century of reef death prediction, this was the first instance of one group of reef death predictors telling another group to dial down the alarmism, or they would queer the pitch for everybody. But an old hand like Holdren knows better than to listen to sudden outbursts of moderation. Back in the day, when extreme cooling was the fashion, he was an extreme coolist. Lately he is an extreme warmist. He will surely continue to be an extremist of some kind, even if he has to be an extreme moderate. And after all, his boss was right about the ocean. In his acceptance speech at the 2008 Democratic convention, Obama said – and I truly wish that this were an inaccurate paraphrase – that people should vote for him if they wanted to stop the ocean rising. He got elected, and it didn't rise.

The notion of a count-down or a tipping point is very dear to both wings of this deaf shouting match, and really is of small use to either. On the catastrophist wing, whose 'narrative', as they might put it, would so often seem to be a synthesised film script left over from the era of surround-sound disaster movies, there is always a count-down to the tipping point. When the scientists are the main contributors to the script, the tipping point will be something like the forever forthcoming moment when the Gulf Stream turns upside down or the Antarctic ice sheet comes off its hinges, or any other extreme event which, although it persists in not happening, could happen sooner than we think (science correspondents who can write a phrase like 'sooner than we think' seldom realise that they might have already lost you with the word 'could').

When the politicians join in the writing, the dramatic language declines to the infantile. There are only 50 days (Gordon Brown) or 100 months (Prince Charles wearing his political hat) left for mankind to 'do something' about 'the greatest moral challenge ... of our generation'. (Kevin Rudd, before he arrived at the Copenhagen climate shindig in 2009.)

When he left Copenhagen, Rudd scarcely mentioned the greatest moral challenge again. Perhaps he had deduced, from the confusion prevailing throughout the conference, that the chances of the world ever uniting its efforts to 'do something' were very small. Whatever his motives for backing out of the climate chorus, his subsequent career was an early demonstration that to cease being a chorister would be no easy retreat, because it would be a clear indication that everything you had said on the subject up to then had been said in either bad faith or ignorance. It would not be enough merely to fall silent. You would have to travel back in time, run for office in the Czech Republic instead of Australia, and call yourself Vaclav Klaus.

Australia, unlike Kevin Rudd, has a globally popular role in the climate movie because it looks the part. Common reason might tell you that a country whose contribution to the world's emissions is only 1.4% can do very little about the biggest moral challenge even if it manages to reduce that contribution to zero; but your eyes tell you that Australia is burning up. On the classic alarmist principle of 'just stick your head out of the window and look around you', Australia always looks like Overwhelming Evidence that the alarmists must be right. Even now that the global warming scare has completed its transformation into the climate change scare so that any kind of event at either end of the scale of temperature can qualify as a crisis, Australia remains the top area of interest, still up there ahead of even the melting North Pole, despite the Arctic's miraculous capacity to go on producing ice in defiance of all instructions from Al Gore. A 'C' student to his marrow, and thus never quick to pick up any reading matter at all, Gore has evidently never seen the Life magazine photographs of America's nuclear submarine Skate surfacing through the North Pole in 1959. The ice up there is often thin, and sometimes vanishes. But it comes back, especially when someone sufficiently illustrious confidently predicts that it will go away for good.

After 4.5 billion years of changing, the climate that made outback Australia ready for Baz Luhrmann's view-finder looked all set to end the world tomorrow. History has already forgotten that the schedule for one of the big drought sequences in his movie Australia was wrecked by rain, and certainly history will never be reminded by the mass media, which loves a picture that fits the story. In this way, the polar bear balancing on the photo-shopped shrinking ice-floe will always have a future in show business, and the cooling towers spilling steam will always be up there in the background of the TV picture while the panel of experts discuss what Julia Gillard still calls 'carbon', her word for carbon dioxide. Pictures of her house near the beach in Adelaide, on the other hand, will never be used to illustrate satirical articles about a retired prophet of the rising ocean who buys a house near the beach, because there won't be any such articles. The full 97% of all satirists who dealt themselves out of the climate subject back at the start look like staying out of it until the end, even if they get satirised in their turn. One could blame them for their pusillanimity, but it would be useless, and perhaps unfair. Nobody will be able plausibly to call Emma Thompson dumb for spreading gloom and doom about the climate: she's too clever and too creative. And anyway, she might be right. Cases like Leonardo di Caprio and Cate Blanchett are rare enough to be called brave. Otherwise, the consensus of silence from the wits and thespians continues to be impressive. If they did wish to speak up for scepticism, however, they wouldn't find it easy when the people who run the big TV outlets forbid the wrong kind of humour. On Saturday Night Live back there in 2007, Will Ferrell, brilliantly pretending to be George W. Bush, was allowed to get every word of the global warming message wrong, but he wasn't allowed to disbelieve it.

Just as all branches of the modern media love a picture of something that might be part of the Overwhelming Evidence for climate change even if it is really a picture of something else, they all love a clock ticking down to zero, and if the clock never quite gets there then the motif can be exploited forever. But the editors and producers must face the drawback of such perpetual excitement: it gets perpetually less exciting. Numbness sets in, and there is time to think after all. Some of the customers might even start asking where this language of rubber numbers has been

heard before.

It was heard from Swift. In Gulliver's Travels he populated his flying island of Laputa with scientists busily using rubber numbers to predict dire events. He called these scientists 'projectors'. At the basis of all the predictions of the projectors was the prediction that the Earth was in danger from a Great Comet whose tail was 'ten hundred thousand and fourteen' miles long. I should concede at this point that a sardonic parody is not necessarily pertinent just because it is funny; and that although it might be unlikely that the Earth will soon be threatened by man-made climate change, it might be less unlikely that the Earth will be threatened eventually by an asteroid, or let it be a Great Comet; after all, the Earth has been hit before.

That being said, however, we can note that Swift has got the language of artificial crisis exactly right, to the point that we might have trouble deciding whether he invented it, or merely copied it from scientific voices surrounding him in his day. James Hansen is a Swiftian figure. Blithely equating trains full of coal to trains full of people on their way to Auschwitz, Hansen is utterly unaware that he has not only turned the stomachs of the informed audience he was out to impress, he has lost their attention. Professor of Earth Sciences Chris Turney, who led a ship full of climate change enthusiasts into the Antarctic ice to see how the ice was doing under the influence of climate change and found it was doing well enough to trap the ship, could have been invented by Swift. (Turney's subsequent Guardian article, in which he explained how this embarrassment was due only to a quirk of the weather, and had nothing to do with a possible mistake about the climate, was a Swiftian lampoon in all respects.) Compulsorily retired now from the climate scene, Dr Rajendra Pachauri was a zany straight from Swift, by way of a Bollywood remake of The Party starring the local imitator of Peter Sellers; if Dr Johnson could have thought of Pachauri, Rasselas would be much more entertaining than it is. Finally, and supremely, Tim Flannery could have been invented by Swift after ten cups of coffee too many with Stella. He wanted to keep her laughing. Swift projected the projectors who now surround us.

They came out of the grant-hungry fringe of semi-science to infect the heart of the mass media, where a whole generation of commentators taught each other to speak and write a hyperbolic doom-language ('unprecedented', 'irreversible', etcetera), which you might have thought was sure to doom them in their turn. After all, nobody with an intact pair of ears really listens for long to anyone who talks about 'the planet' or 'carbon' or 'climate denial' or 'the science'. But for now – and it could be a long now – the advocates of drastic action are still armed with a theory that no fact doesn't fit. The theory has always been manifestly unfalsifiable, but there are few science pundits in the mass media who could tell Karl Popper from Mary Poppins. More startling than their ignorance, however, is their defiance of logic. You can just about see how a bunch of grant-dependent climate scientists might go on saying that there was never a Medieval Warm Period even after it has been pointed out to them that any old corpse dug up from the permafrost could never have been buried in it. But how can a bunch of supposedly enlightened writers go on saying that? Their answer, if pressed, is usually to say that the question is too elementary to be considered.

Alarmists have always profited from their insistence that climate change is such a complex issue that no 'science denier' can have an opinion about it worth hearing. For most areas of science

such an insistence would be true. But this particular area has a knack of raising questions that get more and more complicated in the absence of an answer to the elementary ones. One of those elementary questions is about how man-made carbon dioxide can be a driver of climate change if the global temperature has not gone up by much over the last twenty years but the amount of man-made carbon dioxide has. If we go on to ask a supplementary question – say, how could carbon dioxide raise temperature when the evidence of the ice cores indicates that temperature has always raised carbon dioxide – we will be given complicated answers, but we still haven't had an answer to the first question, except for the suggestion that the temperature, despite the observations, really has gone up, but that the extra heat is hiding in the ocean. It is not necessarily science denial to propose that this long professional habit of postponing an answer to the first and most elementary question is bizarre. Richard Feynman said that if a fact doesn't fit the theory, the theory has to go. Feynman was a scientist. Einstein realised that the Michelson-Morley experiments hinted at a possible fact that might not fit Newton's theory of celestial mechanics. Einstein was a scientist too. Those of us who are not scientists, but who are sceptical about the validity of this whole issue – who suspect that the alleged problem might be less of a problem than is made out – have plenty of great scientific names to point to for exemplars, and it could even be said that we could point to the whole of science itself. Being resistant to the force of its own inertia is one of the things that science does.

When the climatologists upgraded their frame of certainty from global warming to climate change, the bet-hedging manoeuvre was so blatant that some of the sceptics started predicting in their turn; the alarmist cause must surely now collapse, like a house of cards. A tipping point had been reached. Unfortunately for the cause of rational critical enquiry, the campaign for immediate action against climate doom reaches a tipping point every few minutes, because the observations, if not the calculations, never cease exposing it as a fantasy. I myself, after I observed Andrew Neil on BBC TV wiping the floor with the then Secretary for Energy and Climate Change Ed Davey, thought that the British government's energy policy could not survive, and that the mad work which had begun with Ed Miliband's Climate Act of 2008 must now surely begin to come undone. Neil's well-informed list of questions had been a tipping point. But it changed nothing in the short term. It didn't even change the BBC, which continued uninterrupted with its determination that the alarmist view should not be questioned.

How did the upmarket mass media get themselves into such a condition of servility? One is reminded of that fine old historian George Grote, when he said that he had taken his A History of Greece only to the point where the Greeks themselves failed to realise they were slaves. The BBC's monotonous plugging of the climate theme in its science documentaries is too obvious to need remarking, but it's what the science programmes never say that really does the damage. Even the news programmes get 'smoothed' to ensure that nothing interferes with the constant business of protecting the climate change theme's dogmatic status. To take a simple but telling example: when Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's Vice Chancellor and man in charge of the Energiewende, talked rings around Greenpeace hecklers with nothing on their minds but renouncing coal, or told executives of the renewable energy companies that they could no longer take unlimited subsidies for granted, these instructive moments could be seen on German television but were not excerpted and subtitled for British television even briefly, despite Gabriel's



accomplishments as a natural TV star, and despite the fact that he himself was no sceptic.

Wrong message: easier to leave him out. And if the climate scientist Judith Curry appears before a US Senate committee and manages to defend her anti-alarmist position against concentrated harassment from a senator whose only qualification for the discussion is that he can impugn her integrity with a rhetorical contempt of which she is too polite to be capable? Leave it to YouTube. In this way, the BBC has spent ten years unplugged from a vital part of the global intellectual discussion, with an increasing air of provincialism as the inevitable result. As the UK now begins the long process of exiting the European Union, we can reflect that the departing nation's most important broadcasting institution has been behaving, for several years, as if its true aim were to reproduce the thought control that prevailed in the Soviet Union. As for the print media, it's no mystery why the upmarket newspapers do an even more thorough job than the downmarket newspapers of suppressing any dissenting opinion on the climate. In Britain, the Telegraph sensibly gives a column to the diligently sceptical Christopher Booker, and Matt Ridley has recently been able to get a few rational articles into the Times, but a more usual arrangement is exemplified by my own newspaper, the Guardian, which entrusts all aspects of the subject to George Monbiot, who once informed his green readership that there was only one reason I could presume to disagree with him, and them: I was an old man, soon to be dead, and thus with no concern for the future of 'the planet'. I would have damned his impertinence, but it would have been like getting annoyed with a wheelbarrow full of freshly cut grass.

These byline names are stars committed to their opinion, but what's missing from the posh press is the non-star name committed to the job of building a fact-file and extracting a reasoned article from it. Further down the market, when the Daily Mail put its no-frills news-hound David Rose on the case after Climategate, his admirable competence immediately got him labelled as a 'climate change denier': one of the first people to be awarded that badge of honour. The other tactic used to discredit him was the standard one of calling his paper a disreputable publication. It might be – having been a victim of its prurience myself, I have no inclination to revere it – but it hasn't forgotten what objective reporting is supposed to be. Most of the British papers have, and the reason is no mystery.

They can't afford to remember. The print media are on their way down the drain. With almost no personnel left to do the writing, the urge at editorial level is to give all the science stuff to one bloke. The print edition of The Independent bored its way out of business when their resident climate nag was allowed to write half the paper. In its last year, when the doomwatch journalists were threatened by the climate industry with a newly revised consensus opinion that a mere two-degree increase in world temperature might be not only acceptable but likely, the Independent's chap retaliated by writing stories about how the real likelihood was an increase of five degrees, and in a kind of frenzied crescendo he wrote a whole front page saying that the global temperature was 'on track' for an increase of six degrees. Not long after, the Indy's print edition closed down.

At the New York Times, Andrew Revkin, star colour-piece writer on the climate beat, makes the whole subject no less predictable than his prose style: a cruel restriction. In Australia, the Fairfax papers, which by now have almost as few writers as readers, reprint Revkin's summaries as if

they were the voice of authority, and will probably go on doing so until the waters close overhead. On the ABC, the house science pundit Robyn Williams famously predicted that the rising of the waters 'could' amount to 100 metres in the next century. But not even he predicted that it could happen next week. At the Sydney Morning Herald, it could happen next week. The only remaining journalists could look out of the window, and see fish.

Bending their efforts to sensationalise the news on a scale previously unknown even in their scrappy history, the mass media have helped to consolidate a pernicious myth. But they could not have done this so thoroughly without the accident that they are the main source of information and opinion for people in the academic world and in the scientific institutions. Few of those people have been reading the sceptical blogs: they have no time. If I myself had not been so ill during the relevant time-span, I might not have been reading them either, and might have remained confined within the misinformation system where any assertion of forthcoming disaster counts as evidence. The effect of this mountainous accumulation of sanctified alarmism on the academic world is another subject. Some of the universities deserve to be closed down, but I expect they will muddle through, if only because the liberal spirit, when it regains its strength, is likely to be less vengeful than the dogmatists were when they ruled. Finding that the power of inertia blesses their security as once it blessed their influence, the enthusiasts might have the sense to throttle back on their certitude, huddle under the blanket cover provided by the concept of 'post-normal science', and wait in comfort to be forgotten.

As for the learned societies and professional institutions, it was never a puzzle that so many of them became instruments of obfuscation instead of enlightenment. Totalitarianism takes over a state at the moment when the ruling party is taken over by its secretariat; the tipping point is when Stalin, with his lists of names, offers to stay late after the meeting and take care of business. The same vulnerability applies to any learned institution. Rule by bureaucracy favours mediocrity, and in no time at all you are in a world where Julia Slingo is a figure of authority, and Judith Curry is fighting to breathe. Under Stalin, Trofim Lysenko became more indispensable the more he reduced all the other biologists to the same condition as Soviet agriculture, and even after Stalin was dead, it took Andrei Sakharov to persuade Khrushchev not to bring Lysenko back to office. Khrushchev was well aware that Lysenko was a charlatan, but he looked like a historic force; and who argues with one of those?

On a smaller scale of influential prestige, Lord Stern lends the Royal Society the honour of his presence. For those of us who regard him as a vocalised stuffed shirt, it is no use saying that his confident pronouncements about the future are only those of an economist. Vaclav Klaus was only an economist when he tried to remind us that Malthusian clairvoyance is invariably a harbinger of totalitarianism. But Klaus was a true figure of authority. Alas, true figures of authority are in short supply, and tend not to have much influence when they get to speak. All too often, this is because they care more about science than about the media. As recently as 2015, after a full ten years of nightly proof that this particular scientific dispute was a media event before it was anything, Freeman Dyson was persuaded to go on television. He was up there just long enough to say that the small proportion of carbon dioxide that was man-made could only add to the world's supply of plant food. The world's mass media outlets ignored the footage, mainly because they Didn't know

who he was. I might not have known either if I hadn't spent, in these last few years, enough time in hospitals to have it proved to me on a personal basis that real science is as indispensable for modern medicine as cheap power. Among his many achievements, to none of which he has ever cared about drawing attention, Dyson designed the TRIGA reactor. The TRIGA ensures that the world's hospitals get a reliable supply of isotopes.

Dyson served science. Except for the few hold-outs who go on fighting to defend the objective nature of truth, most of the climate scientists who get famous are serving themselves. There was a time when the journalists could have pointed out the difference, but now they have no idea. Instead, they are so celebrity-conscious that they would supply Tim Flannery with a new clown-suit if he wore out the one he is wearing now. In 2016, he dived on the Great Barrier Reef and reported himself overwhelmed by the evidence that it was on the point of death, a symptomatology which, he said, he had recently learned to recognise by watching his father die. Neither he nor any of his admirers at the Sydney Morning Herald cared to note that it has now been almost 50 years that the reef has been going to die soon. But the moment never came, although it will probably go on being about to happen for the next 50 years as well. The reef death disaster is like those millions of climate change refugees who were going to flood into the West by 2010. They never arrived. But when the refugees from the war in Syria started to arrive, there was a ready-made media apparatus waiting to declare that they were the missing climate change refugees really, because what else had caused the war but climate change? They were the missing heat that had been hiding in the ocean.

A bad era for science has been a worse one for the mass media, the field in which, despite the usual blunders and misjudgements, I was once proud to earn my living. But I have spent too much time, in these last few years, being ashamed of my profession: hence the note of anger which, I can now see, has crept into this essay even though I was determined to keep it out. As my retirement changed to illness and then to dotage, I would have preferred to sit back and write poems than to be known for taking a position in what is, despite the colossal scale of its foolish waste, a very petty quarrel. But when some of the climate priesthood, and even the Attorney General of the United States, started talking about how dissent might be suppressed with the force of law – well, that was a tipping point. I am a dissenter, and not because I deny science, but because I affirm it. So it was time to stand up and fight, if only because so many of the advocates, though they must know by now that they are professing a belief they no longer hold, will continue to profess it anyway.

Back in the day, when I was starting off in journalism – on the Sydney Morning Herald, as it happens – the one thing we all learned early from our veteran colleagues was never to improve the truth for the sake of the story. If they caught us doing so, it was the end of the world.

But here we are, and the world hasn't ended after all. Though some governments might not yet have fully returned to the principle of evidence-based policy, most of them have learned to be wary of policy-based evidence. They have learned to spot it coming, not because the real virtues of critical enquiry have been well argued by scientists, but because the false claims of abracadabra have been asserted too often by people who, though they might have started out as scientists of a kind, have found their true purpose in life as ideologists. Modern history since World

War II has shown us that it is unwise to predict what will happen to ideologists after their citadel of power has been brought low. It was feared that the remaining Nazis would fight on, as Werewolves. Actually, only a few days had to pass before there were no Nazis to be found anywhere except in Argentina, boring one another to death at the world's worst dinner parties.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, when it was thought that no apologists for Marxist collectivism could possibly keep their credibility in the universities of the West, they not only failed to lose heart, they gained strength. Some critics would say that the climate change fad itself is an offshoot of this lingering revolutionary animus against liberal democracy, and that the true purpose of the climatologists is to bring about a world government that will ensure what no less a philanthropist than Robert Mugabe calls 'climate justice', in which capitalism is replaced by something more altruistic.

I myself prefer to blame mankind's inherent capacity for raising opportunism to a principle: the enabling condition for fascism in all its varieties, and often an imperative mind-set among high end frauds. On behalf of the UN, Maurice Strong, the first man to raise big money for climate justice, found slightly under a million dollars of it sticking to his fingers, and hid out in China for the rest of his life – a clear sign of his guilty knowledge that he had pinched it. Later operators lack even the guilt. They just collect the money, like the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, who has probably guessed by now that the sea isn't going to rise by so much as an inch; but he still wants, for his supposedly threatened atoll, a share of the free cash, and especially because the question has changed. It used to be: how will we cope when the disaster comes? The question now is: how will we cope if it does not?

There is no need to entertain visions of a vast, old-style army of disoccupied experts retreating through the snow, eating first their horses and finally each other. But there could be quite a lot of previously well-subsidised people left standing around while they vaguely wonder why nobody is listening to them anymore. Way back there in 2011, one of the Climategate scientists, Tommy Wils, with an engagingly honest caution rare among prophets, speculated in an email about what people outside their network might do to them if climate change turned out to be a bunch of natural variations: 'Kill us, probably.' But there has been too much talk of mass death already, and anyway most of the alarmists are the kind of people for whom it is a sufficiently fatal punishment simply to be ignored.

Nowadays I write with aching slowness, and by the time I had finished assembling the previous paragraph, the US had changed presidents. What difference this transition will make to the speed with which the climate change meme collapses is yet to be seen, but my own guess is that it was already almost gone anyway: a comforting view to take if you don't like the idea of a posturing zany like Donald Trump changing the world.

Personally, I don't even like the idea of Trump changing a light bulb, but we ought to remember that this dimwitted period in the history of the West began with exactly that: a change of light bulbs. Suddenly, 100 watts were too much. For as long as the climate change fad lasted, it always depended on poppycock; and it would surely be unwise to believe that mankind's capacity to believe in fashionable nonsense can be cured by the disproportionately high cost of a temporary



embarrassment. I'm almost sorry that I won't be here for the ceremonial unveiling of the next threat. Almost certainly the opening feast will take place in Paris, with a happy sample of all the world's young scientists facing the fragrant remains of their first ever plate of foie gras, while vowing that it will not be the last.

Cover image: Classic Comics no. 16: Gulliver's Travels (December 1943; Lilian Chesney cover and art), Wikimedia Commons