

Global Warming and the ABC

A Pernicious Mixture of Science and Environmentalism

AARON OAKLEY

GLOBAL warming is arguably the most significant environmental concern of the '90s. Some argue that greenhouse gas emissions (a consequence of human activity) are resulting in global warming and that this will lead to environmental catastrophes in the next century. Some believe that we are already experiencing catastrophic climate change, with any unusual weather patterns (be it record high or low temperatures, storms or snowfalls) being attributed to human-induced climate change. The Kyoto Protocol (to which Australia is a signatory), drafted at the Kyoto conference in late 1997, sets various countries mandatory targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The ideological goal of this is to reduce global warming. Mandatory greenhouse gas emissions and climate change would have potentially serious impacts on the Australian economy and environment. As our publicly-funded national broadcaster, the ABC should be expected to provide Australian citizens with high-quality information about these issues. Thus, it is pertinent to examine the ABC's coverage of the global warming issues, the Kyoto conference and its Protocol.

I searched the ABC Website (<http://www.abc.net.au>) for items dealing with the Kyoto conference, global warming and other related topics. Relevant items were analysed to determine if any assumptions (implicit or explicit) were made about the certainty of global warming. Items describing the potential impacts of global warming were categorized as being positive, negative or neutral. Furthermore, a list of parties quoted or interviewed by ABC reporters was compiled to determine if there was any bias in the selection of interviewees. A total of 28 news and commentary items dating back to 1996 were retrieved. In those news items and commentaries describing potential impacts of global warming, almost all focused on the negative aspects. Examples include the increasing frequency of drought in Eastern Australia, the deleterious effects on ocean cir-

culatation and sea life, and the death of corals on the Barrier Reef. In total, 13 of the recovered ABC reports featured discussion of negative impacts that might result from global warming.

Commentary from climate and meteorological scientists that was featured in ABC reports focused on the mechanisms of climate and weather pattern change, the greenhouse effect and global warming. By and large, their commentary was restrained and sensible. There were frequent references to the gaps in the scientific understanding of global climate and the provisional nature of climate-change projections. Scientists who made statements on the negative impacts of global warming were not, however, subjected to critical questioning by ABC reporters. This might have been expected considering that these scenarios are at best speculative. Furthermore, I was unable to find evidence that Australian or overseas scientists who are more sceptical of the accepted global warming scenarios were interviewed on this topic.

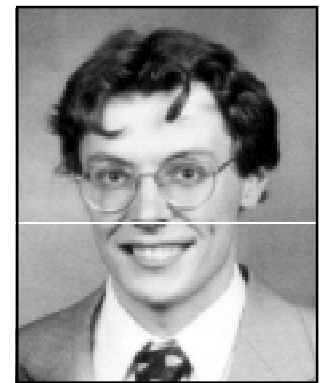
Apart from scientists, organizations and persons quoted by ABC reporters included Greenpeace, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Other notable commentators include Clive Hamilton of the Australia Institute and Alan Moran of the IPA. Comments by Greenpeace featured in no fewer than five stories. One news item was dedicated exclusively to comments by Greenpeace and the ACF. Disturbingly, none of the comments from these conservation groups were subject to critical examination, and thus the ABC's airing of those comments was essentially free publicity for them.

As science is evidence-based and not consensus-based, the reference that some ABC reporters made to the alleged scientific 'consensus' on global warming was somewhat misplaced. In a number of articles, ABC reporters made the *assumption* that global warming is real, some even making assertions to that end. From the *Four Corners* report 'The Hot Debate' (aired 18 August 1997):

The scientists now agree that the earth's climate is warming ... that the greenhouse effect is a fact.

In total, ten items were found in which ABC reporters made the assumption that human-derived global warming was a fact.

Lay persons relying on the ABC for balanced commentary probably gained the impression that catastrophic climate change will be a reality unless we impose substantial curbs on our greenhouse gas emissions in the near future. The selective interviewing of scientists supportive of global warming scenarios, the almost exclusive focus on the negative impacts of global warming, and the predominance of environmentalist commentary suggest that the ABC is significantly biased in its reporting of global warming issues. It is fair to conclude that the ABC's reporting represents a pernicious mixture of science and environmentalism. The absence of interviews of scientists critical of the 'consensus' view on global warming, and the paucity of comments from persons and groups opposed to the Kyoto Protocol, are tantamount to censorship by omission. While preliminary, this study suggests that further systematic investigation of the ABC's handling of environmental issues—and in particular its handling of the global warming issue—is both warranted and overdue.



Dr Aaron Oakley is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Western Australia with a keen interest in science and the environment.

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