

## Postpone the Copenhagen climate meeting

Richard Gilbert

Pessimism pervades the ranks of policy-makers committed to action at the United Nations Climate Change conference to be held in Copenhagen, Denmark, December 7-18. The prospect of reaching an international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is fading. Poorer countries don't want to reduce expected emissions unless richer countries promise more compensation than they are likely to provide.

The rest of us should see reasons for optimism in the diminished prospects for early agreement. A delay could allow further debate as to whether the recent level of concern about climate change is justified. Reduced preoccupation with climate change could allow more focus on the many other, perhaps more valid reasons for reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

In spite of occasional suggestions that the science of climate change is settled – in science, nothing is ever settled – there is in reality much uncertainty as to how carbon dioxide emissions might raise global temperatures enough to cause concern. The uncertainties lie chiefly in scientists' understanding of the numerous roles of water vapour and clouds. The need for debate about the human contribution to climate change has been sharpened by data suggesting that global warming has stopped during last decade, that Arctic ice cover is increasing again, and that ocean levels are no longer rising.

What caused the late-20th-century warming that resulted in so much excitement about the climate? It could have been mostly a confluence of natural cycles. These include a longer-term cycle providing a gradual temperature increase as our planet leaves the Little Ice Age that ended early in the 19th century. There is also a shorter-term cycle – perhaps more closely related to solar activity – that produced cooling from 1880 to 1910, warming from 1910 to 1940, cooling from 1940 to 1970, warming from 1970 to 2000, and the suggestion of cooling since then (all periods approximate).

The temperature upswing from the 1970s to the end of the century, combined with faulty physical assumptions and irrational exuberance on the part of climate scientists, gave us what may well have been flawed predictions that business-as-usual will fry the planet.

If fossil fuel use is not contributing significantly to climate change, does this mean we can now burn carbon-emitting fossil fuels with abandon? No, for at least three reasons:

One is that burning them causes local pollution: chiefly summer smog and winter smog. Fossil-fuel-burning road vehicles, usually the main source of smog, produce less pollution than a few decades ago (although more than manufacturers like to claim). Nevertheless, in Canada hundreds of thousands of people have poorer health because of fossil fuel use. In the US, it's millions. Worldwide, it's billions.

Another reason to reduce fossil fuel use is that our ways of living have become dependent on them, and some fossil fuels are getting to be in short supply. The main challenge is oil, which fuels 95 per cent of the world's motorized transportation. We've used so much oil, world production could soon start to fall.

Indeed, demand bumping up against limits to supply likely caused the run-up in oil prices in 2007 and early 2008. High oil prices may well have triggered the current recession, chiefly through depressing auto sales. If we don't cut back on oil use we could be doomed to a vicious cycle of oil price spikes and economic woes.

A third reason for reducing fossil fuel is that there may be a real carbon problem: ocean acidification. Most of the carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels ends up in the oceans, making them more acidic. The greater acidity may damage coral reefs, numerous species near the bottoms of food chains, and eventually us all.

Preoccupation with the possibility that human activity is changing the climate has crowded out attention to numerous potentially more important issues.

Here's what could be done. Focus scientific research on the basic physics of the atmosphere and on the reasons for what may be a current downswing in the average temperatures of the lower atmosphere and oceans. Postpone the upcoming Copenhagen meeting for three years. By December 2012 we should know whether it will make more sense to replace the Kyoto Protocol or do nothing about climate concerns.

Meanwhile, push even harder on reducing fossil fuel use, particularly oil. The main alternative is transportation that uses electricity as a fuel, preferably from sun, wind, and marine and geothermal sources. Push harder on cleaning up the air in our cities and on not polluting our oceans.

In the 1980s, I was an early adopter of the climate change story. It meshed with my fears about what humans were doing to the planet, and the story seemed grounded in good science. After a decade of growing uncertainty, I'm now mostly convinced that much of the scientific community has been gripped by an elaborate delusion.

When accounts of how the delusion gained hold are published, they will likely reveal little in the way sinister intents and unsavoury conspiracies. The accounts will mostly be chronicles of how even the most rational of humans can get caught up in things. It's in our nature, much as it is in the nature of our planet to cycle between warmer and cooler eras.

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