

Editor Bias on Climate Change?

Science's Editor-In-Chief Donald Kennedy uses his Editorials inappropriately to advocate politically derived goals--undermining the proper role of Science and endangering credibility with the public. In "An unfortunate U-turn on carbon" (Editorial, 30 March 2001, p. 2515), he accused President George Bush of reversing his position on the Kyoto Protocol. There was no such reversal: Bush had made it quite clear during his 2000 campaign that he opposed the Protocol -- echoing the U.S. Senate, which had unanimously rejected such restrictions on energy use in 1997.

Next came "The policy drought on climate change" (Editorial, 17 Jan., p. 309), in which Kennedy attacked the White House research plan for the Climate Change Science Program (CCSP). Kennedy faults the strategic plan for concentrating on, yes, science. He wants studies on regulation of energy--putting the cart before the horse!

Then we get "The climate divide" (Editorial, 21 March, p. 1813), where Kennedy bemoans the CCSP's lack of recommendations for emission controls to avert what he considers a climate catastrophe that would trigger an abrupt cooling of the temperate Northern Hemisphere. But climate models predict a steady warming as greenhouse gases rise. And abrupt climate changes have been occurring throughout the history of Earth (1-3). Kennedy also endorses a wildly implausible British plan to reduce their CO2 emissions by 60% by 2050--with mostly wind power and without the use of nuclear reactors. But just a week later, we read that stabilization of global climate (or at least its alleged human component) would require installing carbon-free primary power at the rate of 1000 MW each day over the next 50 years (4). That's like adding an amount of nuclear capacity every year equal to what is now in existence globally. The Editorials basically call for drastic action to limit carbon dioxide emissions, like sequestering CO2 from power plants or the rationing of energy by legislated cap-and-trade schemes--all costly but also ineffective (5). Kennedy even suggests that Bush's refusal to join Kyoto has provoked European resentment with respect to the Iraq problem. Kennedy keeps insisting that "[t]he scientific evidence on global warming is now beyond doubt" (17 Jan.). Presumably, he sees no need for further climate-science research--contrary to evidence published in his own journal (6, 7) to which he responded dismissively. There isn't even solid evidence for current warming: A National Research Council report (8) confirms that the atmosphere has not warmed appreciably for the past 20-odd years. And there are no "fingerprints" that would assign any observed surface warming trends to human-produced greenhouse gases. Just a week before Kennedy's 21 March Editorial, researchers suggested a completely different picture on what drove rapid climate change at the end of the most recent ice age (9). And on 28 March, another group had to admit that it was not known what produces abrupt climate change (10). Maybe we do need to know more science before we charge blindly ahead with ruinous mitigation schemes based on opinions.

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References and Notes

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Response

Some climate scientists criticized me for publishing Fred Singer's earlier letter [(5) in his letter], in which he attempted to rebut--as he does here--the consensus of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and of most scientists. I'm doing it again, even though his case is old wine in a new bottle, because I think it important for Science's readers to hear and to evaluate a position that is still taken by many industry and political leaders. I invite those readers to examine Singer's selection from the scientific literature. His references (8) and (9) add to our knowledge about the history of abrupt climate change, but say nothing against the consensus for contemporary global warming and, if anything, support growing concerns that its continuation might produce dramatic, nonlinear responses. He ignores the recent Report by B. D. Santer et al. (1), which shows that the alleged discrepancy between surface and satellite measurements of global temperature--of which he made much in his earlier letter--is largely attributable to inconsistencies in the satellite data.

Much of his argument with me is about three Editorials, and he has misread each one of them. In the first, the word "Kyoto" does not appear; the U-turn I described was Bush's reversal on his campaign commitment (later called a "mistake" by a White House spokesperson) to include carbon dioxide among the four regulated atmospheric pollutants. The second never faulted the science in the administration's plan, but pointed out that its focus on long-range alternative energy research unfortunately bypassed the need for shorter-range remediation strategies. The third did not label abrupt cooling as the likely alternative to continued "steady warming"; it pointed out that the former has received increasing support from new studies.

Donald Kennedy
Reference

- B. D. Santer et al., *Science* 300, 1280 (2003).