

## Climate Change

Keith Rankin, 13 May 2007

Climate change, as an issue, seems so much bigger than all other issues of concern. Yet it has the feeling of being a fad, like the nuclear issue that dominated our politics in the mid-1980s, the genetic-modification issue that dominated the 2002 election campaign.

I presume that the planet is warming, and has been warming since the 1970s. And I accept that human activity is likely to be at least partly responsible. But we need to place the issue in a proper moral context, and a historical context. Otherwise the debate will prove to be no more than a distraction – welcome to some – from the other many economic, social and scientific issues that also require a share of the limelight.

Today we look back at the radical economic changes that took place in the 1980s, and we wonder why it was so easy for a government to make those reforms that favoured so few at significant cost to so many.

One of the main reasons for the lack of economic debate was the distraction arising from our then-fashionable anti-nuclear posturing. Indeed, on one single Saturday morning (NZ time) in March 1985, David Lange and Roger Douglas both experienced their signature moments. Mr Lange smelt uranium on the breath of an Oxford University student. Roger Douglas floated the New Zealand dollar, a decision with huge unintended consequences that plague us today.

I always get the feeling that, like the monetarists and the nuclear-free radicals two decades ago, both the climate-change true-believers and the climate-change sceptics are pursuing moral agendas that go well beyond the quest for academic truth. The true believers seem to have an agenda that requires a huge amount of collective control over individual behaviour, while the sceptics in many cases seem to represent the right-to-pollute whenever- and wherever-we-like lobby.

Do we need to know for sure that the earth is turning into something like Venus, before we consider treating our planetary home with respect? I hope not. We should be reprogramming ourselves to live as environmentally sustainable communities regardless of whether the earth is warming, cooling or neither. It's a moral, not a scientific argument. The first rule of sustainability is "Thou shalt not foul thine own nest". This is a moral absolute; it is not conditional on the findings of the latest temperature readings from the Antarctic Peninsula. And it's very good economics.

Climate change has played a prominent role in economic history. In a cooling world, the middle part of the first millennium AD was associated with economic collapse in Europe and China, and the rise of civilisations in the warmer Middle East and North Africa (Islam) and the southern parts of India and China. Then, in a much warmer "Medieval" period, we saw the rise again of northern Europe and northern China.

Later, in the Little Ice Age in the middle of the second millennium, famine spread into Scandinavia, armies from the north plundered central Europe, rivers like the Thames froze over, and New Zealand's Fox and Franz Joseph glaciers were vastly bigger than they are today.

In the warming of the early 20th century, we have the image of the 1930s' dustbowls in the American mid-west. Before that Australia had a massive drought in the late 1890s and early 1900s. It affected New Zealand in three ways: we did not join Australia, we received large numbers of single men from Australia (who build the North Island Main Trunk Railway), and the early New

Zealand Labour Party was over-represented by Australians who wanted to build a better world (Holland, Savage, Webb, Semple).

Climate change has been a feature fact of all human history, and humans adapted to it, through migration and innovation. The biggest known adaptations took place 14,000 year, 11,000 years and 8,000 years ago. In total, sea levels in the tropics increased by over 100 metres. (Sea level rises were less in temperate latitudes due to the land rising as the weight of ice was removed.) 11,000 years ago sea levels rose about 50 metres in 50 years.

These events took place at around the time of the rise of agriculture. The area we now know as "Island South East Asia" lost half its land area, especially it's best agricultural land. Most of the tribes in the region have folklore relating to a great flood. These lands were the homelands of the Austronesian peoples, the forebears of today's Polynesians and Maori. These people became the greatest sailors ever in the "ancient world".

Whatever happens with climate change will be momentous, whatever its cause. But the planet will survive, and so will humanity, because both have survived more dramatic events in the last 10,000 or so years than anything that climate scientists predict will happen this century.

We need to think much more about understanding the ways that real-world economies work (and not just the abstract economies that populate advanced economics textbooks), about creating sustainable and adaptable economies that will hold us in better stead whether or not the climate warms or cools in the next few decades.

The present debate about global warming distracts us from making investments in sustainable living, and, as we push the panic button, is even opening the door to the widespread re-introduction of nuclear power. Our nuclear waste today will have a more detrimental impact on humankind in the next millennium than will our continued but careful use of fossil fuels.

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