

Monday, 11 May 2009

Nature will deal with sceptics

by Clive Hamilton

The roots of today's climate scepticism, the most recent expression of which is the new book by Adelaide geosciences professor Ian Plimer, can be found in the 1992 Earth Summit. The Rio Summit was a watershed not just for international environmentalism but also for US conservatism.

As jubilation over the fall of the Berlin Wall subsided, the wave of environmental activism around the world was perceived as a political threat. Rush Limbaugh, then building his conservative credentials, went on the offensive: "With the collapse of Marxism, environmentalism has become the new refuge of socialist thinking."

A counter-movement emerged, resolved to resist what seemed like a renewed attack on the idea of progress and mastery over nature that for conservatives defined modernity itself. These same sentiments help explain why a handful of US scientists with genuine climate science credentials broke from the bulk of their colleagues and joined the anti-environment movement.

Myanna Lahsen has studied the life experiences and beliefs of three prominent physicists — Frederick Seitz, Robert Jastrow and William Nierenberg — who founded the George C. Marshall Institute and were prominent in the conservative backlash against climate science in the 1990s.

The three rose to positions of privilege and respect in the post-war decades, an era of American supremacy built on what Lahsen calls "...a pre-reflexive modernist ethos" in which science and technology were believed to hold the answer to any problem. As the masters of scientific progress humans had the right, even the obligation, to assert control over the natural world through the application of their intelligence to practical problems.

In this world the scientists, and especially the physicists, stood at the centre of the modernist project and their special knowledge gave them a unique entitlement to shape opinion.

The emergence of the environment and peace movements in the 1970s challenged the benefits of nuclear technology, the power of the military-industrial complex and the claims of science to neutrality and benevolence. It is hard now to appreciate the shock caused by Rachel Carson's 1962 classic *Silent Spring* documenting the effects of pesticide use on wildlife in rural America. Carson was confronting the technological hubris of American capitalism and her book is often said to have spawned the environment movement.

The criticism of the hitherto unquestioned place of science and technology destabilised the power and privilege of the scientific elite. Frederick Seitz himself wrote of his depression over the new political environment and its assault on the idea of progress through technological advance.

The determination of the scientific elite to defend their privileged place in society was only one manifestation

of a broader conservative resistance to the social and cultural transformations brought by the 1960s. As Lahsen observed of the trio of climate denying physicists:

Their engagement in US climate politics can be understood as part of a struggle to preserve their particular culturally and historically charged understandings of scientific and environmental reality ...

This reading of conservative resistance applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Australian sceptics like Ian Plimer, Bob Carter and William Kininmonth — all scientists in their 60s or older, schooled in the unquestioning pre-1970s faith in the power of science and technology. And it explains why their attack on mainstream climate science has such strong appeal to conservative forces in Australia.

For sceptics like these, the dispute is not really about sun spots, hockey stick graphs or the existence of a consensus. In truth it is not about global warming at all; it is about defending a set of conservative values and privileges that are threatened by environmentalism. It is a plea for a return to an older world order.

This is the starting point for Ian Plimer's campaign against mainstream climate science, now set out in his book *Heaven + Earth*, which has been seized upon by conservatives across Australia as a vindication of their repudiation of environmentalism.

Despite its manifold scientific short-comings, including a number of school-boy howlers — soon pointed to by [climate scientists like Barry Brook \(http://bravenewclimate.com/2009/04/23/ian-plimer-heaven-and-earth/\)](http://bravenewclimate.com/2009/04/23/ian-plimer-heaven-and-earth/) and [Tim Lambert \(http://scienceblogs.com/deltoid/2009/04/the_science_is_missing_from_ia.php\)](http://scienceblogs.com/deltoid/2009/04/the_science_is_missing_from_ia.php) — Plimer's intervention stimulated a chorus of crowing from right-wing commentators like Andrew Bolt ([Plimer challenges “the global warming hysterics, hypocrites and carpet baggers” \(http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/sceptic_spared_a_sliming_is_the_climate_changing/\)](http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/sceptic_spared_a_sliming_is_the_climate_changing/)), Miranda Devine ([“Plimer's book ... will help redress the power imbalance between those who claim to own the knowledge and the rest of us” \(http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/planet-doomsayers-need-a-cold-shower-20090417-aa4s.html?page=-1\)](http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/planet-doomsayers-need-a-cold-shower-20090417-aa4s.html?page=-1)), and Christopher Pearson ([“2009 will be seen as the turning point and divided into the pre and post-Plimer eras \(http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25348644-7583,00.html\)”](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25348644-7583,00.html)).

Repudiating climate science has become the focus of their culture war. *The Australian's* heavy promotion of *Heaven + Earth* was also predictable. Uninterested in any assessment of its scientific claims, the book bolsters the apparently ecophobic worldview of the newspaper's editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell.

Mitchell's campaign is interesting because (as I noted in my book *Scorcher*) *The Australian* has campaigned vigorously against the influence of 'post-modernism' throughout Australia's institutions, holding itself up as the defender of objective truth against the corrosive influence of moral relativism. Yet alone among the world's newspapers it devotes acres of space on its opinion pages to sceptics like Plimer to both dismiss the science and “deconstruct” the motives of the scientists who carry it out.

Nowhere is scientific truth more malleable, contingent and contestable than in the pages of *The Australian* where there prevails a form of anti-scientific fundamentalism that has less regard for scientific method than the most committed constructivist on any university campus.

Plimer embodies the view of science and progress that defined Frederick Seitz and the other physicists, a

faith in the ability of man to control his own destiny through the rigorous application of reason. It takes on a slightly different shade among older geologists who see their life's work as contributing to human wealth and prosperity through providing the building blocks for almost everything — pharmaceuticals, transportation, heating, cooling, all of the comforts of modern life.

Those who work with the mining industry tend to absorb the view that human progress depends on mining and its products more than anything else. It was a view common enough among his peers, but Plimer seems to cleave to a belief in the supremacy power of science and technology more dogmatically than most.

Plimer devoted years to a personal war against creationism, on the face of it a worthwhile cause, except that he engaged with such bare-knuckled zeal that he alienated his [fellow sceptics \(http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/how-not-to-argue.html\)](http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/how-not-to-argue.html) and became mixed up in ugly court cases. One of his previous allies against creationism, philosophy professor and atheist activist Jim Lippard, wrote a stinging repudiation of Plimer's resort to "abuse and ridicule" and his misrepresentation of the views of other scientists. Defending "proper scepticism" against dogmatism, Lippard wrote:

When commitment to a particular theory is greater than commitment to scientific methods, the scientist becomes a "true believer" who falls back upon irrational modes of defense. This analysis is frequently applied to creationists, but unfortunately there are times when it applies to the opponents of [creationism as well \(http://www.discord.org/~lippard/hnta.html\)](http://www.discord.org/~lippard/hnta.html).

Plimer's hostility to environmentalism seems to predate his attacks on climate science. He deploys the usual epithets such as "tree-huggers" and dismisses environmentalism as a new religion, akin to [paranormal beliefs \(http://www.independentweekly.com.au/news/local/news/general/environment-the-new-religion/1254171.aspx\)](http://www.independentweekly.com.au/news/local/news/general/environment-the-new-religion/1254171.aspx), arguing that "greens" have an authoritarian agenda and promote policies that would [take us backwards \(http://www.independentweekly.com.au/news/local/news/general/dont-hold-your-breath-on-co2/465447.aspx\)](http://www.independentweekly.com.au/news/local/news/general/dont-hold-your-breath-on-co2/465447.aspx).

Naturally, he is drawn to right-wing groups that share his worldview and the fear of the threats to it posed by the social movements of the 60s and 70. He is involved in the right-wing Melbourne think tank the [Institute for Public Affairs \(http://beta.desmogblog.com/node/1398\)](http://beta.desmogblog.com/node/1398), the Australian organisation that most closely mimics the conservative think tanks that have provided the intellectual ballast for neo-conservatism in the United States. The IPA has been prominent in anti-greenhouse activism and, unsurprisingly, is partly funded by [Exxon-Mobil \(http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/11/26/1101219743320.html\)](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/11/26/1101219743320.html).

Plimer also has links to the [Lavoisier Group \(http://www.lavoisier.com.au/articles/greenhouse-science/climate-change/plimer2007-33.php\)](http://www.lavoisier.com.au/articles/greenhouse-science/climate-change/plimer2007-33.php), since 2000 the main entrepôt for climate denialism in Australia. As documented in my book, the Group was founded by Ray Evans, the moving force behind a number of right-wing organisations, including the H.R Nicholls Society, the Bennelong Society and the Samuel Griffiths Society. And he is an 'allied expert' with a Canadian group called the Natural Resource Stewardship Project, which is linked to energy industry lobbyists.

In turning against mainstream science Plimer has also had to turn against mainstream scientists, including colleagues he has worked with for decades. Some of them are members of the IPCC whose reports Plimer dismisses as "holy writ" and whose authors he calls "[pseudoscientific pedlars of bad news \(http://www.independentweekly.com.au/news/local/news/general/environment-the-new-religion/1254171.aspx\)](http://www.independentweekly.com.au/news/local/news/general/environment-the-new-religion/1254171.aspx)".

Adam Morton recently summarised the bizarre conspiratorial conception that Plimer shares with US sceptics: “The IPCC, he says, is a dishonest political organisation hijacked by environmental activists and diplomats to boost trade, encourage protectionism and [add costs to competitors](#) (<http://www.theage.com.au/national/the-sceptics-shadow-of-doubt-20090501-aqa1.html?page=1>)”.

It’s the sort incoherent bogey-man conception that is impossible to argue with. And that’s the thing about the climate sceptics; for all of their claims to be the defenders of the truth and heroes of dissent, they have made themselves immune to the evidence that the real world throws up. There appears to be only one way to deal with the sceptics: wait patiently for them to die off. It shouldn’t take long.

*Clive Hamilton is Visiting Professor, Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and the author of **Scorcher: The dirty politics of climate change** (Black Inc).*

