

CLIMATE CHANGE: A SHORT NOTE

By Professor Ferdinand E. Banks

Many years ago, interrupting my return from Sydney to Stockholm, I stopped in Brisbane (Australia) to give a half-dozen amateur and half-baked lectures on environmental economics. In my mathematical economics classes in Sydney I usually walked up to the podium or whiteboard with a smile on my face, ready and able to deal with anyone who thought that they had a lesson to give my good self, while in Brisbane I was in unknown territory, because my knowledge of this subject (environment and climate) was probably only marginally superior to that of the less alert members of my audience.

As I write the above lines, in the charming university town of Uppsala (Sweden), and also Stockholm, hundreds or maybe thousands of person are forming ranks in preparation for a Climate March (or demonstration), while gorgeous Paris (France) is in the process of opening its arms, hearts and restaurants to politicians (and their advisors) from 140-150 countries, who will be in the front line of perhaps the largest climate/environmental conference in history,

I won't attend any of these gigs. I wouldn't have anything to do with them if I received a round-trip, all-expenses paid invitation because I am too smart to waste my valuable time listening to the fractured wisdom launched by distinguished conference attendees with less than a miniscule insight into climate/environmental/energy matters. Just as important, I am not interested in trying to explain to them the elementary thermodynamics required to understand technical matters of the kind found on the business pages of their local newspapers, or perhaps in the comic books of their children or grandchildren.

What I will do however is to tell them how I attempt to boost my slender knowledge of climate/environmental issues. First and foremost, on that subject, I am only interested in the writing and thinking of superstars. This practice, incidentally, is not necessary for making the most of your courses in calculus, economics, strength of materials, ballistics, or history, but it is absolutely necessary for this topic, because otherwise you expose you and yours to the most grotesques varieties of nonsense. Put less dramatically, **YOU EXPOSE YOURSELF TO AN OVERDOSE OF WILD GUESSES AND LIES!**

And who are these superstars? Well, John von Neumann was often called the best brain of the 20th century, but after finding out what I have found about him I would not have attended his lectures if he paid me. He may of course have had something to offer

in his papers and conversations, but to me lectures provide the measure of a scholar. (Let me note however, that no one who knew von Neumann wasted any time criticizing him, because as a mathematician that gentleman was strictly in a class by himself.)

For the purposes of the present discussion, I am going to nominate Freeman Dyson as your Man of the Year, and suggest that if you want to know more about him than the few comments below, you should turn to Google. The thing about Dyson is that you can find his work in virtually every kind of publication, and the respect for this work is impressive. Dyson accepts that anthropogenic (man-made) global warming exists, and even accepts that it is the result of burning fossil fuels such as oil and coal. However he does not accept the mathematical models that are supposed to provide precise answers to the development of global warming. It may be the case though that he wants answers from these models that mathematics cannot provide.

In addition, he may – may – be on what I consider to be the wrong side of the nuclear discussion, because when discussing *clean energy*, nuclear should be at the top of the list. In case he isn't, please let me apologize, because despite all the lies and misunderstandings that teachers of energy economics like my good self must confront, in 2014 nuclear power generated about 60% of the carbon-free electricity in the U.S., though its contribution to total power generation in that country is only 19-20%.

Dyson is a signatory of a letter to the UN criticizing the IPCC (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), because of their intolerance of views that are outside the mainstream of scientific opinion on climate change. What he fails to understand here is that as with football (soccer) the issue is not just truth but money and 'perks'. Some of most preposterous suggestions ever forwarded have been made by international organizations that are plying their trade at international conferences such as the one about to take place in Paris. (The IPCC investigates scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant to risks that might occur as a result of human-induced climate change. I once regarded their activities as useless, however I was recently informed that they too now accept that nuclear has a great deal to offer.)

Dyson has correctly argued that political efforts to reduce the causes of climate change distract from other global problems that should take priority. He says that "I'm not saying the warming doesn't cause problems, obviously it does. Obviously we should be trying to understand it. I'm saying that the problems are being grossly exaggerated. They take away money and attention from other problems that are much more urgent and important. Poverty, infectious diseases, public education and public health. Not to mention the preservation of living creatures on land and in the oceans." Since taking

interest in climate studies, Dyson suggests that [carbon dioxide](#) levels in the atmosphere could be controlled by planting fast-growing trees.

He calculates that it would take a trillion trees to remove all carbon from the atmosphere, which is interesting, although I would like to know how many would have to be planted every year to prevent carbon dioxide levels from increasing. In any event, as all intelligent women and men know, planting trees costs money, and many of the persons making decisions about planting trees (and things like increasing the quality and quantity of primary and secondary education in their countries) are more interested in ‘running off at the mouth’ at conferences in places like Paris.

Finally, I say a few words about environment and climate in my new book *ENERGY AND ECONOMIC THEORY* (2015). But just a few mind you, because neither I nor anybody else knows what we should (and probably) could eventually know about this *INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT* topic. Perhaps you can help us some day.

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