

### Climate Change Campaigning: An Excess of Certainty

By Jonathan Rosenhead



As a relative newcomer to this issue, I offer this contribution with a degree of trepidation. Perhaps this is appropriate to my theme, which is that there is too much certainty expressed too often by those attempting to alert the international community, the government, the public, anyone who will listen, to the approaching perils. This is not to suggest that we back off. What I am suggesting is that an acceptance of the limits of our knowledge about the future might actually help persuade other people to listen, and even to act.

Donald Rumsfeld's pronouncement on uncertainty is now widely known. But for those of you who haven't already come across it, it is:

*There are known knowns; there are things we know we know.*

*We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.*

Arguably this quotation is the one unquestionable positive outcome of Rumsfeld's disastrous tenure as US Secretary for Defense. He is one of the men who gave us the Iraq invasion, and in fact this statement is from a 2002 press briefing explaining the strange failure to find any weapons of mass destruction. But let that pass.

Too much of the polemic seeking to alert the unconvinced to pressing climate change dangers is phrased as known knowns – an inexorable clockwork future. Some of it is expressed as known unknowns: “if world society/the British/consumers do X, then Y will happen which will cause these unpleasant Zs – but we don't yet know if those ‘X’ actions will actually happen”. Meanwhile that large portion of the body politic sitting on its hands is, I believe, thinking something like “how can they possibly know that those initiating events will happen, or that the chain of consequences will definitely follow?” Shouting louder is not going to get their attention. It is more likely to generate further disbelief.

It also seems to me (as a relative outsider) that a good deal of insider discussion is expressed in terms of misplaced certainties. People, perhaps whole research units, adopt particular positions on the importance of one source of greenhouse gases versus another – or they engage in second-order debates with other experts about how best to estimate the scale of this or that effect. The topic is very complex, so as a result there is almost unlimited scope for scholasticism.

From my exposure to these discussions it has seemed as if their overwhelming focus has been on mitigating the feared effects of climate change. That is, the

focus is on how to persuade a distracted government and a public with a limited attention span that the danger is so certain and pressing that action must be taken now to deflect the path of global warming downwards.

If we are sure that world-scale, damaging, physical and social effects of climate change are already inevitable, and that what we can do from now on will at best only prevent these effects from being even worse – then why are we not campaigning for concrete actions to protect against these impacts? There does seem to have been a view abroad that to argue for adaptation would be to sell the pass, to accept that mitigation has failed. But if we are already so sure that bad things are on the way, why are we not also demanding investment in defensive precautions? I would suggest that the absence of calls for adaptation makes the demands for mitigation less credible.

Conversely, calls for specific precautionary measures would have two positive effects. First, it would make protagonists' warnings of substantial, deeply worrying and now unavoidable climate change more credible, since actions to prepare for the future changes would become part of the portfolio of persuasive demands. Secondly, this re-positioning would bring the question of climate change and our response to it down from the rarefied stratosphere of arguments about causes, projections, and wholesale lifestyle changes. The political agenda would then include practical arguments about investment in specific infrastructure – a very healthy reality check.

Unknown unknowns also come into play when it comes to investing in expensive adaptations to our communal living arrangements. How can we know what adaptations will be necessary when climate

change implications for any particular region are so far from certain? In cases of radical uncertainty (at its starkest, will we suffer flood or drought?) it is not sensible to commit to adaptive investments any earlier than necessary. We would be like a goalkeeper facing a penalty kick – having to choose which way to jump based on very slim evidence of which way the ball will go.

But in other cases our choices are not so stark – when it is not a question of what sort of adaptation, but of how much. Flood defences are one example. Sea level will rise more at +6°C than at +2°C, so higher temperatures necessitate higher and sturdier flood defences. For this type of situation the question becomes, “can precautions adequate for lower temperature gains be designed to adapt flexibly should temperature rise more than expected?” There are precedents for this sort of ‘robust’ planning in other fields, and it is not too soon to start advocating and implementing it in the field of climate change adaptation.

#### About the author:

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