

The Politics of Fear on a Warming Planet

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Abstract

As most people now seem to agree, climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing the human race. No one is immune from its effects - although the poor are likely to suffer most - and we have all contributed to its development - although the wealthy and the wealthy nations are largely responsible for the current state of affairs. By continuing to burn fossil fuels and clear forests we are inevitably worsening the problem. While scientists and policy makers advance various proposals to deal with climate change, few stop to consider the most effective ways of producing the necessary and substantial changes in our individual and collective behaviour. Whether it is modifying our transport use, energy use, patterns of settlement, food consumption and the design of our homes or accepting higher prices for some products and services, there is no doubt that just as human behaviour lies as the root of the problem, so it must be a major part of the solution. Fundamentally, it is human behaviour which must be modified to ameliorate global warming. And on a scale that has never before been contemplated.

While much money, time and energy have been devoted to understanding the consequences of human action on the climate, there has not been a corresponding effort to understand how we can stimulate the changes in human behaviour needed to forestall (or even adapt to) the predicted outcomes of global warming. What is needed is a comprehensive analysis of which changes in human behaviour are most likely to reduce global warming and how such changes can be facilitated. This in turn requires a better understanding of how people perceive and experience climate change and which modifications to human systems people are more likely to accept and adapt to. For example, climate friendly behaviour may be induced by marketing and information strategies which alter demand for various products and services or by changing the products and services that are available through technology, pricing and regulation. In either case the public's acceptance of such policies, including their judgements about the fairness and efficacy, are critical to their success.

Many of the proposals for modifying our patterns of consumption and energy use to reduce greenhouse gas emissions take the form of exhortations to change accompanied by dire warnings about the catastrophic consequences of failure to act – from drowning to burning. Much of the resistance to accepting the science and refusing to ratify Kyoto was also justified by an appeal to fear- the threat of economic destruction and the slide into grinding poverty. In both cases, fear appears to have been selected as the motivating force most likely to produce – or prevent - the needed change. Climate change is commonly presented through an alarmist prism as awesome, terrible, immense, indeed as beyond human control. The language conjures up visions of Armageddon, sometimes with a “quasi-religious register of death and

doom.”¹ Words and phrases like “time bomb”, “havoc”, “catastrophe” “devastation”, “annihilation” appear repeatedly in scientific and media reports, implicitly reinforcing a counsel of despair. But fear is an emotion that should be approached with caution. For one thing, people constantly reminded of their own mortality may actually become more materialistic and resistant to messages of restraint. In using fear to try to engender a sense of urgency in the community, many scientists and commentators may, in fact, be producing the opposite effect to the one they desire, particularly if their messages are not accompanied by recommendations for action which people believe are likely to make a difference. One of the possible consequences of engendering high levels of fear is that it may cause paralysis in those who are threatened; a sense of powerlessness and inertia, rather than effective action, may be the result. In societies already riddled with fear arousing messages, such appeals to fear may inadvertently position climate change as just another media beat-up which will disappear when the next big bogey-man has been fashioned.

Even if people do experience the fear and sense of alarm these messages communicate, their responses may not translate into climate-friendly behaviours. There is a substantial public health literature which has examined the circumstances in which fear appeals directed toward encouraging health behaviour such as stopping people smoking or moderating their drinking, produce the desired attitude and behaviour change and, conversely, when such appeals backfire, causing people to use psychological defence tactics to resist the message, minimizing and denying the risk. Little is known about whether and in what circumstances fear based persuasive techniques will change attitudes and stimulate environmentally friendly behaviours such as saving energy. Ultimately our success in dealing with climate change will depend on understanding how we can change human behaviour, with and without the use of fear. Social scientists expert in understanding persuasive communication and behaviour change should be in the forefront of efforts to mitigate global warming. At the moment, they are nowhere to be seen.

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¹ Institute for Public Policy Research (2006) Warm Words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better/