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CLIMATEGATE IS JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

David Henderson

Two recent episodes have given rise to concerns about the quality and reliability of received expert advice on climate change.

First is the unauthorised release of a mass of email exchanges from the server of the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia: the contents have put in question the conduct of CRU scientists and some of their correspondents.

Second is the discovery that statements made in the fourth and most recent Assessment Report (AR4) from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) were based on sources which should not have been given weight. In relation to what was said about Himalayan glaciers, the IPCC has issued a formal admission of error.

The concerns raised by these episodes are well founded. However, 'Climategate' and 'Glaciergate' are not to be viewed in isolation. They are instances of a more fundamental and deeply entrenched phenomenon.

In relation to climate change issues, the established official expert advisory process which governments have commissioned and relied on has shown itself, over many years, to be not professionally up to the mark. The situation is one of unwarranted trust.

The main headings of unprofessional conduct within the process, all identified and documented before the recent revelations, have been:

- Over-reliance on in-group peer review procedures which do not serve as a guarantee of quality and do not ensure due disclosure
- Serious and continuing failures of disclosure and archiving in relation to peer-reviewed studies which the IPCC and member governments have drawn on.
- Continuing resistance to disclosure of basic information which reputable journals insist on as a precondition for acceptance. (In the CRU emails, participants discuss a range of arguments, pretexts and devices that could be used to fend off disclosure, including the deletion of emails containing material that had been sought under FOI requests – requests which were made only because authors had not followed accepted scholarly procedures).
- Basic errors in the handling of data, through failure to consult or involve trained statisticians.
- Failure to take due account of relevant published work which documented the above lapses, while disregarding IPCC criteria for inclusion in the review process.
- Failure to take due note of comments from dissenting critics who took part in the preparation of AR4.

- Resisting the disclosure of professional exchanges within the AR4 drafting process, despite the formal instruction of member governments that the IPCC's proceedings should be 'open and transparent'. And last but not least
- Failure on the part of the IPCC and its directing circle to acknowledge and remedy the above deficiencies.

In the light of 'Glaciergate', one could add to the above list 'reliance on worthless (non-peer-reviewed) sources'. But mere insistence on peer review would leave in place the other basic flaws.

Comprehensive exposure of these flaws has come from a number of independent commentators. Particular mention should be made of two Canadian authors, Stephen McIntyre and Ross McKittrick: both separately and in joint publications, going back to 2003, they have made an outstanding contribution to public debate. Together with a perceptive British critic, David Holland, they are the subject of unfavourable references in the CRU emails. However, their work and that of other informed critics has been disregarded by governments, and by most commentators in academic journals and the media alike.

The glaring defects in the expert advisory process have gone unacknowledged and unremedied by what I call the environmental policy milieu. This high-level failure, as also the defects themselves, have resulted from chronic and pervasive bias. Right from the start, members of the milieu, and of the IPCC's directing circle, have been characterised by what has been well termed 'pre-commitment to the urgency of the climate cause'.

Although the IPCC in particular is now under fire, this is too restricted a focus. It is true that the Panel's work forms the leading element in the official expert advisory process. But the basic problem of unwarranted trust goes further: it extends to the chronically biased treatment of climate change issues by responsible departments and agencies which the Panel reports to, and in nationally-based organisations which they finance (such as the CRU).

It is not just the environmental policy milieu that is to blame for the mishandling by governments of climate change issues. As a former Treasury official and international civil servant, I have been surprised by the failure of economic departments in OECD member countries to audit the evidence bearing on climate change issues, their uncritical acceptance of the results of a process of inquiry which is so obviously biased and flawed, and their lack of attention to the criticisms of that process which have been voiced by independent outsiders – criticisms which they ought to have been making themselves. A similar lack of resource has characterised the Research Department of the IMF and the Economics Department of the OECD. In all these departments and agencies, there has been a conspicuous failure of due diligence.

The chief moral to be drawn is simple. In an area of policy where so much is at stake, and so much remains uncertain and unsettled, policies should be evolutionary and adaptive, rather than prescriptive as they are now; and their evolution should be linked to a process of inquiry and review which is more thorough, balanced, open and objective than has so far been the case.

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