

# **The BBC's Climate Change Meltdown**

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The BBC can't do much to help us stop climate change and it shouldn't try. That's not its job, any more than it is its job to abolish poverty or adultery. But one suspects that its upper reaches are stuffed with busy, mildly literate generalists who want to be on the side of the angels. More sharply, the BBC dreads spreading complacency like wildfire. It therefore feels safer – more precautionary – 'bigging-up' alarmism. The difficulty – as is always the difficulty with the 'We Must Do Something' school – is that we may well do the wrong thing or do too little of the right thing.

You may say that the BBC's news and current affairs outlets have already made it clear that doubting the 'consensus' of United Nations' IPCC (Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change) and its 'We Must Do Something' mantra is close to absurd. Newsnight's science correspondent, Susan Watts, and the Today Programme's environment correspondent, Roger Harrabin, give us every sign that they think sceptics are fools or knaves or both.

The difference now is that we are beginning to see the BBC's populist wing tend to the standard alarmist propaganda just as the intellectual wheels are falling off the 'We Must Do Something' wagon.

I mean here not that we are all now more doubtful of the climate change science. Far from it. We could accept the idea that there is a consensus on the science (there isn't) and we could accept its dire predictions (which may well be false) and we could still wonder where the moral and practical point lies in going beyond the little we are likely to be prepared to do. This cynicism partly flows from the calculation that northern European (and north American coastal) virtue, such as it is, will be massively outweighed by worldwide indifference. But it also flows from the vast uncertainties as to the value of marginal – or even of quite major – action to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases.

I think predictions on most things are folly, but I suggest that the West will do what is cheap and convenient about climate change and will see no serious point in beating itself up about its failure to do very much more. Public opinion – which matters in the West – will not be very virtuous, nor wholly callous.

The BBC will get all this more or less right in the end, simply because it will not dare get far ahead of its public. Besides, it currently adores populism, and there is nothing more selfish than a populace. So its current failings won't matter much. Still, they do matter.

March 14 saw one of the first outings of what the BBC has promised will be a major set of programmes in May and the summer. *Meltdown* had Paul Rose, a polar explorer, address global warming. He pretended to be an innocent investigator of the issue – an honest working class naif whose discoveries on the web and elsewhere we could follow as they unfolded. Indeed, he was boldly

disingenuous, pretending to be a sceptic for whom climate alarmism came as an unwelcome surprise. Surely the climate has always changed, he insisted? Hadn't the Thames frequently frozen-over a century or so ago? Hadn't the Vikings gone off to sunny Greenland and managed there until the 15<sup>th</sup> Century? Well yes, said his informants – but then there's the 'hockey stick' world temperature graph which shows that previous variations are nothing to the current huge increase. Besides, Greenland's melting. These propositions are all much more complex than pictures of dripping ice could convey – but anyway, what was so wrong with the Viking's green Greenland?

Quicker than you could say Google Earth, we whooshed off to Rose's old stamping ground, Antarctica, via the Cambridge HQ of the UK's revered Scott Polar Institute. It was emerging that our chirpie friend was actually a geography establishment heavyweight. Indeed, he's been around the places and people where and for whom climate change is all but an obsession: the chance that he hadn't made up his mind about this stuff years ago must be very slight.

Paul Rose was still maintaining a sort of wide-eyed, pubbish reluctance to be conned by swivel-eyed white coats, but swallowed the Antarctica warming story wholesale. Wouldn't a real sceptic have enjoyed remarking that though it is much remarked by the 'consensus' that one small part of Antarctica is indeed warming dramatically, the vast majority is as cold as ever, and with an expanding burden of snow and ice?

By half way through the programme it was obvious that this was all leading somewhere and that we were not on a voyage of discovery but of exposition. We were being led to a disquisition on how important it is to reduce the very great uncertainty around climate. How true. The show's answer – which we were for dramatic purposes allowed to suppose was a discovered surprise – is to run current computer models of the climate over and over again so that the variations in their outcome could produce a 'cluster' of results, the pattern of which would yield a better class of prediction. Please, said Rose, download a bit of software from [www.climateprediction.net](http://www.climateprediction.net) and your desktop can partake in a vast, linked, People's Computation.

Now of course, followers of this scene will know that this game has been played before. In January 2005, the same team trumpeted that a similar mass experiment had produced the prediction that climate change might be twice as bad as had been predicted previously (and be so more or less regardless, one might say, of what we did about it). Twice as bad, but not twice as likely, or twice as precisely analysed.

The problem is surely that this sort of experiment (if such modeling deserves that name) is the old one of 'rubbish in, rubbish out'. Besides, how does splitting the difference between lots of runs of models get one any closer to the truth? One might merely generate average nonsense. Those of us who are sceptical that

anyone knows enough about the climate processes to be able to model it accurately are often derided as Neanderthals. I certainly accept that I know nothing about the climate except that people who do are profoundly uncertain about the things which matter most. That, I do know. And yet we sceptics have had a significant boost recently. Commenting on new work which suggested that Greenland's ice-cap is disappearing twice as fast as the computers had predicted, one of the leading climate alarmists, Jim Hansen, wrote in the Independent: 'But we can now see that the models are almost worthless. They treat the ice sheets like a single block of ice that will slowly melt. But what is happening is much more dynamic'.

Now. If the models are 'almost worthless' because they under-predicted calamity, what are we to make of them? Why not treat them with the sort of scepticism the sceptics treat them with, remembering that uncertainty does of course go both ways?

And here's the rub, which the BBC will have great difficulty dealing with. Climate change presents massively difficult policy choices partly because it is so uncertain a beast. A Blue Peter, let's all try a bit harder, sort of approach is for the birds and for the pulpits of daffy vicars. This isn't about satisfying little Johnny's temporary enthusiasm for his geography teacher's Greenpeace lectures.

Most climate alarmists make predictions which lead them to suggest that the present generation must make quite serious self-denying decisions. A sceptic says that the climate alarmists can be right about the climate but wrong about adjusting it. We – I am this sort of sceptic – think that what societies are likely to do can at best produce a slight mitigation of climate effects already in train.

The sceptical message is, I think, honest. It may also be dangerous.

Here's the big problem. It may well be morally right for British people to go much further in greenhouse gas self-denial than they want. Such actions may be beacons of virtue in a dark world. We may be able to say 'we told you so', when the planet's climate goes belly up.

But it really may be that such actions are no more than gestures. They may turn out to be a dangerous diversion from action which matters more.

I am in the unattractive position of being unable to assess where morality lies in this matter, and so I try to call the factual and moral odds as best I may. That's my job. But then I am not a campaigner, guru or leader. I am, I suppose, an analyst. Which of these various roles would you like the BBC to play?

*Meltdown* was an indication that the BBC is likely to treat climate change as something too awful to allow broadcasters to risk the public being given appropriately complex information and insights about it.