

It is Crucial to Act Now to Address the Global Risks



The scientific evidence for global warming is conclusive, argues *Bob White*

The Bishop of Chester, Dr Peter Forster, questions what he terms “global-warming alarmism” (Comment, 21 October). Part of his argument is that there is uncertainty in the precise link between the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the size of the resultant global warming. But uncertainty does not mean improbability. There is no doubt about the increase of global carbon dioxide, nor that global warming is caused by increased greenhouse gases.

One of the main uncertainties is that things may get even worse than current models predict, if we pass critical tipping points. We have already pushed atmospheric carbon dioxide levels higher and at a faster rate than the earth has ever experienced since humans first trod on it. The past is not necessarily a good guide to the future. Almost all of our futures are uncertain, with the well-known exception of death and taxes. But uncertainty does not mean that we should do nothing. That was the argument made vociferously and repetitively by the tobacco lobby, long after it became clear to scientists in the field that there was a strong link between smoking and cancer.

Those delaying tactics may have led to extra profits for the tobacco industry, but arguably they caused many thousands to die unnecessarily. Not taking action now on global climate change could cause millions of extra deaths as people suffer, for example, from long-lasting droughts or devastating floods.

As Lady Thatcher reminded us in a speech to the Royal Society more than 20 years ago, we are currently running an unprecedented experiment on the earth. And as Dr Forster acknowledges, the very idea that human beings could then control the planet’s climate if things turn sour seems doubtful.

RATHER than doing nothing while we wait and see, a much more responsible response to uncertainty about the precise details of climate change is to address the very major risks that we will face if the scientific predictions come about. The increasing trends in the frequency and intensity of floods and droughts in many parts of the world agree well with the expectation provided by the best scientific projections.

The best way to address potential climate change would be to reduce our burning of fossil fuels. They are a finite resource; it makes economic sense to use what we have with more care. The International Energy Agency, in its *Energy Technology Perspectives* reports has demonstrated the affordability of the world’s moving rapidly to non-fossil-fuel energies – by 2050, the extra cost will have been more than matched by savings in fuel cost.

It seems an incongruous suggestion coming from a Bishop that it is somehow foolish for rich countries to cut back their consumption of fossil fuels because it would “enable higher consumption by poorer countries”. Surely the bedrock of justice and equity in a world with finite resources is that those of us who have built affluent life-

styles by using, and continuing to use, far more than our fair share of resources should reduce our consumption. In an equitable world we should all have access to the same share of resources.

CHRISTIANS have clear reasons to take a lead in addressing the issue of global climate change. They believe in a creator God whose first commands to humankind (in Genesis 1.28 and 2.15) were to oversee his creation in their role of vice-regents made in his image- to exercise a beneficial dominion over the earth.

Those who live marginal lives in sub-Saharan Africa or south-east Asia are those most affected by global climate change – not we in the high-income countries who have benefitted most from profligate burning of fossil fuels. How can we follow Jesus's command to love our neighbours, be they on the other side of the world or perhaps not yet born, if we take no account of the likely consequences of our actions?

Dr Forster suggests that “there might be [a case to set up] a global fund, to help poorer nations with flood defences, agricultural adaptation, and other measures if in the event the climate does change very significantly during this century.’ Amen to that. Of course we ought to help those who have been affected by our actions.

The UN passed a resolution in 1970 that economically advanced nations should give 0.7 per cent of their Gross National Income to overseas aid- 40 years later only five have reached that level, but the present British Government has pledged to do so by 2013. We should encourage it to stick by this.

Dr Forster calls for the Churches to recognise the complex ethical, scientific and economic questions surrounding UK climate policy and to lead public debate. I agree. Christians are called to live counter-culturally. If we don't take a lead, then who will?

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