

Opinion & Analysis

Kenny stirs up bogus climate change debate



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As evidence for global warming driven by human impacts stacks up, public opinion on the issue is wilting

WHATEVER HAPPENS next month at the UN climate conference in Copenhagen, humanity has almost certainly already crossed the climate Rubicon. A study earlier this year from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows how changes in surface temperatures, rainfall and sea levels are largely irreversible for upwards of 1,000 years, even if all CO₂ emissions were somehow to completely stop.

Today global CO₂ levels are at about 387 parts per million, and rising fast. This is at least one-third more than the highest levels in the 650,000 years for which reliable readings are available. When gases such as methane and nitrous oxide are factored in, the true CO₂ equivalent is about 440ppm. One way or another, we have entered a new climatic era.

However, as the scientific consensus hardens, public opinion is wilting. A Pew Research Centre survey last month found just 57 per cent of Americans (correctly) believed there was strong scientific consensus on climate change. This is an astonishing drop of 20 points since 2006. There has not in the intervening three years been a scintilla of new peer-reviewed evidence presented to challenge the central tenet that climate change is real, urgent and principally driven by human impacts.

Bush era political consultant Frank Luntz,

in a leaked memo from 2002, explained how it's done: "The scientific debate is closing ... should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled, their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate." In other words, just keep stirring up a bogus "debate".

To all but the diehard deniers, the climate "debate" closed years ago, and all serious focus is on how to achieve rapid global decarbonisation and to brace for the impacts we cannot avoid – a point made forcefully yesterday by the Academy of Engineers who warned that Ireland risks "social and economic disaster" from climate change.

So, everyone is worried? Everyone, it seems, except Pat Kenny. The influential RTÉ broadcaster has regularly aired "alternate" theories and the views of sceptics, especially the discredited David Bellamy. Last Monday he went a step further: "The climate change debate has been raging for decades, and there are still so many fundamental questions left unanswered." This is how he opened a 20-minute piece that mashed together anecdotes, interviews and half-facts, topped off with a generous dollop of the presenter's own editorial slant.

One guest, Dr Wolfgang Knorr, explained

that "sinks of carbon in ocean and land plants have been ramping up, in the same way that we've been ramping up emissions". This led Kenny to jump in with the comment "so to this point the Earth is managing to cope very well, the CO₂ balance in the atmosphere is pretty well maintained ..."

When Knorr tried to explain that no, the system is not coping very well at all, the presenter launched down a truly bizarre tangent: "In terms of us noticing extra CO₂ in the air that we breathe, is it significant or not?" Kenny answered his own question with "I wouldn't be worried about that myself".

Kenny then informed his guest that 98 per cent "of the heat generated on this planet comes from the outside, it's actually solar energy; are we being a bit panicky about what's going on down here on Earth?" Knorr may have been too polite to point out that a similar portion of the energy on Venus is also of solar origin. However, high levels of heat-trapping CO₂ there have created a cauldron with surface temperatures of 480°C.

In a moment of unintentional irony, Kenny inferred that flat-earthers were part of some now-discredited scientific consensus (science actually debunked that view). Kenny stated: "It's virtually impossible for someone who disagrees to get backing for their researches". This, too, is demonstrably untrue. Genuine

peer-reviewed research that actually debunked climate change would be showered with funding. It would also be a shoo-in for a Nobel Prize. Kenny also stated as fact that the Pacific Ocean is cooling. Yet, according to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2008 recorded the seventh hottest Pacific temperatures in 130 years.

I put a series of questions in writing to the broadcaster to clarify his position on climate science; the only one he was prepared to answer was that, yes, he accepts that global warming is occurring. Full stop.

The "debate" is long since over. By choosing not to understand this, Kenny has, perhaps inadvertently, become a high-profile tool in the hands of the climate denial lobby. To borrow a line from the TV licence ad: we've heard all the excuses, Pat, and none of them work.

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