

Opinion & Analysis

Some facts not as changeable as the weather



JOHN GIBBONS

The link between carbon emissions arising from human actions and climate change is scientifically robust

‘WHEN THE facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?’ That’s how the great economist John Maynard Keynes put it. Sounds obvious, yet psychologists tell us that altering deeply ingrained patterns of human behaviour, however destructive they may be, is extraordinarily difficult.

In his book, *Ship of Fools*, Fintan O’Toole discusses what he labels “unknown knowns”, things that were “understood to be the case and yet remained unreal”. At its most extreme, he said, “this worked as a kind of collective psychosis”. Our ability to both know Charles Haughey was a crook, and yet be genuinely surprised when this fact is later confirmed is one instance. Ditto the blind eye Irish society turned as the Catholic Church colluded in decades of depraved violence and abuse against the most defenceless in our society. Everyone knew; no one knew.

Our collective mastery of double-think is clear from the findings of the latest Eurobarometer poll on attitudes to climate change. Some 82 per cent of Irish people believe climate change is a “serious problem”, yet only one in three of us are willing to pay for greener energy. We are, it seems, fully

prepared to sort out the looming environmental catastrophe, as long as it costs nothing and in no way interferes with what we have been led to believe is our right to do as we please in a world without physical limits.

I’ve been involved in healthcare journalism for more than 20 years, and co-founded a group of businesses in this area. My colleagues have generously allowed me space simultaneously to pursue a largely *pro bono* interest in environmental issues. Eight years ago, I drove a blood-red sports car and enjoyed weekend breaks in Manhattan. I changed – because the facts changed.

A background in healthcare is a good primer for climate science. Both disciplines depend on the peer review process ruthlessly to filter out quacks and challenge baseless assumptions, false reasoning or invalid conclusions. Since these processes involve humans, they are not infallible. In 1998 the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, published a paper that (incorrectly) showed a link between the MMR vaccine and autism. Other medical experts quickly and thoroughly discredited this paper and *The Lancet* later apologised. However, for years after the MMR and autism link was refuted, elements in the

media continued to hype up a non-existent link. The result? Vaccination rates plummeted and, in Ireland, several children died needlessly of measles while many others suffered horrific injuries, including blindness.

Why? Because controversy sells. Stoking up a “debate” is the stock in trade of large sections of the media, and the public is largely unaware that they are frequently being served up light entertainment masquerading as informed, honest journalism. Who cares who’s right or wrong, it’s bound to make for a fine old dust-up and boost the ratings.

The link between carbon emissions arising from human actions and climate change is scientifically every bit as robust as the decades of research linking smoking with lung cancer. Career sceptic Dr Fred Singer testified to the US Congress in 1995 that there was “no scientific consensus” linking CFCs with ozone depletion. He also testified under oath that there was no scientific evidence linking second-hand smoking with cancer. Wrong, and wrong again.

Now Dr Singer, a hired gun for the oil and tobacco industries, is back, and this time he’s decrying “fraud” in the University of East Anglia e-mail controversy. He is fuelling the

mendacious line that the petulant e-mails and misdemeanours of three or four scientists at one facility could in some way erase decades of work across hundreds of centres.

As witnessed this week at Copenhagen, politics involves endless compromises and fudges. This time, our common enemy is physics, and physics doesn’t do deals. Break its rules and we unleash hell on Earth.

The last time humanity faced so implacable a foe was from fascism in the late 1930s. Appeasement failed utterly; this menace could only be thwarted by massive industrial transformation and the spirit of sacrifice among the public. Winston Churchill told the House of Commons on May 13th, 1940: “We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind . . . I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.” It was tough medicine, but infinitely better than cynical inaction.

Science tells us that our planet home is running a dangerous fever and is in need of urgent treatment. Let’s make this personal: what if it was your child? Would you listen to the top specialists, take their advice and embark immediately on difficult but rigorously tested life-saving treatment?

Would you really gamble that maybe, just

maybe, the entire medical profession is a conspiracy of crooks and liars and instead put your trust in some self-publicist you heard on radio telling you not to trust the “medical consensus”, take your child off the drip and instead feed them some vitamins that he just happens to sell?

I make no apology for the stark analogy, since we are in fact gambling with our children’s lives. Everyone has vested interests, and in the best journalistic tradition, I must now declare mine: they are age seven and five.

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