

Mediaportal Report

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▶ **No time to nitpick about climate**
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No time to nitpick about climate

EDITOR: Dr D Weston Allen suggests we are wrong, as a civilisation, to put a price on carbon dioxide, methane and other polluting gases that lead to climate change (Letters, 25 July).

His letter is part of the 'contrarian' genre: people who hold to old paradigms in the face of overwhelming evidence.

One can imagine, in the past, that there were similar objections from people who denied the existence of a round Earth, anaesthesia and the dangers of blood letting.

Consider that it is 1846 and reports of anaesthesia have appeared in a colonial outpost. The same newspaper might also report on the Indian rope trick. First-hand observers could be fooled, and a wise person might doubt both claims. Not all new paradigms prove correct, even when popular; consider the interwar fad for eugenics.

The global climate system is complex, and homeostatic mechanisms may delay or even abate dangerous climate change, whose worst manifestations could include widespread social dislocation and famine. But wagering on this rescue

scenario is highly irresponsible, particularly since many climate-sparing options are feasible.

To nitpick over the details of atmospheric and climatic science risks making fools of us. How many readers recall, in medical school, memorising elaborate theories of the mechanisms of drug actions that were later shown to be flawed?

But I cannot resist two rejoinders to Dr Allen's arguments. The idea that past warming has been beneficial to civilisation does not mean that more of the same will be even better – consider a patient with fever.

And, if the global climate has not changed much in the last 10 years, then why has the Arctic ice melt accelerated so much? Why have two "one in 500 year" events flooded the US Midwest since 1990? For that matter, what has happened to rainfall over southern Australia?

Good alternatives to the rampant combustion of fossil fuels do exist, including solar thermal technology, energy conservation and urban redesign. Some of these mechanisms will have other benefits for population

and economic health, such as cleaner air and the conservation of oil. Undoubtedly, tackling climate change will have a significant short-term cost. So does insuring our homes.

But gambling that our best climate scientists are collectively deluded is akin to Russian roulette. Unfortunately, the inertias involved mean that we cannot wait for certainty. Certainty does not mean safety. Soldiers in World War I could hear the shells just before they exploded.

I agree with Dr Allen and

Bjørn Lomborg that more should be done to improve health in the Third World. Literacy should also be increased and contraception made more widely available. It would be far more prudent to divert resources for these purposes from the military than from our still feeble attempts to prevent dangerous climate change.

Assoc Prof Colin Butler
 National Centre for
 Epidemiology and
 Population Health,
 Australian National
 University, ACT

