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APS Appeals to Authority

There are no authorities in science. Experts, yes. Brilliant, well educated experts, yes. *Mistaken*, brilliant, well-educated experts, yes. (The only people who never make mistakes are those who never do anything.) But there are no authorities.

It is therefore distressing to find that an ad-hoc committee of the American Physical Society (APS) has asserted on no uncertain terms that authority rules.

The background is this. The Executive Committee of the APS issued a statement in November 2007 saying

“Emissions of greenhouse gases from human activities are changing the atmosphere in ways that affect the Earth’s climate. Greenhouse gases include carbon dioxide as well as methane, nitrous oxide and other gases. They are emitted from fossil fuel combustion and a range of industrial and agricultural processes.

“The evidence is incontrovertible: Global warming is occurring. If no mitigating actions are taken, significant disruptions in the Earth’s physical and ecological systems, social systems, security and human health are likely to occur. We must reduce emissions of greenhouse gases beginning now.

“Because the complexity of the climate makes accurate prediction difficult, the APS urges an enhanced effort to understand the effects of human activity on the Earth’s climate, and to provide the technological options for meeting the climate challenge in the near and longer terms. The APS also urges governments, universities, national laboratories and its membership to support policies and actions that will reduce the emission of greenhouse gases.”

The second and third lines of the first paragraph are reasonable statements of fact, and the only other reasonable part is “the APS urges an enhanced effort to understand the effects of human activity on the Earth’s climate.” Would that they had followed their own counsel, and even broadened the sentence to include *natural* effects on the climate.

About 100 APS members, including many Fellows and Distinguished Professors have signed a petition submitted by Robert H. Austin [1] challenging the APS 2007 *Statement on Climate Change*. One very good reason for issuing the challenge was not in the petition: the executive board has no business pretending that they speak for the membership. A second is that the board itself has no expertise in climate science. The petition drive was initiated because the *Statement* is riddled with unproven assertions.

The petition did not seek to discard the *Statement*, but instead to supplant it, using phrases like, “[M]easured or reconstructed temperature records indicate that 20th – 21st century changes are neither exceptional nor persistent.”

Later, “The APS supports an objective scientific effort to understand the effects of all processes—natural and human—on the Earth’s climate and the biosphere’s response to climate change.”

Accordingly, the APS cobbled together an ad-hoc committee to consider the petition. The Chairman was Dan Kleppner (MIT) who has expertise in laser cooling and trapping [TEA January 2009, “Optical Molasses”], a topic that relates to precisely one component of climate. Robert Adair (Yale) has written some nice books about the physics of baseball. I am unacquainted with the others, David M. Ceperley (theoretical physics, U. of Illinois) Alexander L. Fetter (bosonic gases, Stanford), Helen R. Quinn (missing antimatter, CP violation, Stanford), and Ellen D. Williams (surface physics, U. of Maryland). This is obviously a group of brilliant people—but where is the expertise in anything related to climatology?

Anybody who has followed the global-warming discussions would know that skeptics challenge the data, methodology, and conclusions of the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC). Accordingly, it would be reasonable to do some independent investigation of those topics. Apparently the ad-hoc committee did no such thing. I quote:

To review these issues we have relied primarily on the 4th Assessment Report [AR4] of the International Panel on Climate Change, in particular its first volume: *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group 1 to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Solomon *et al*, Cambridge University Press]. (PSB). We have also turned to the NRC report *Surface Temperature Reconstructions for the Last 2,000 Years*, Committee on Surface Temperature Reconstructions for the Last 2,000 Years, (National Research Council, 2006). (STR).

It may come as a surprise to the ad-hoc committee, but skeptics have also read those reports—thoroughly—and still disagree. (By its vocabulary, the NC’s STR seems to have been lifted uncritically from AR4.) It adds no intellectual or scientific content to the two reports merely to read and parrot them.

To put it fairly but bluntly, the ad-hoc committee of the APS said that the reports are true because the reports say they are true.

[1] Robert H. Austin, Professor of Physics, Princeton University, Fellow APS, AAAS; APS Council: 1991-1994, 2007-2010, Member National Academy of Sciences, American Association of Arts and Sciences

A Look at some *Real Science*

I very highly recommend Ian Plimer's new book [2]. I just flipped the book open to an arbitrary page (178), and will say something about the references. The first reference on the page is #839, and it refers to a paper in *Science*. There are four more references on the same page, respectively to scientific articles in *Geology*, *Earth Science Reviews*, *Science*, and *Earth and Planetary Science Letters*. There are no references to blogs, opinion pieces, newspaper articles, or any other such fluff. The last reference in the book is #2311.

Did I mention that the ad-hoc committee of the APS used *two references? TWO, of which one is cribbed from the other?* Zero point one percent as many references as Plimer cites? (Even if you count the 500 or so unread references in the Science-based Chapter 9 of AR5, Plimer single-handedly outperforms the IPCC by a factor of 4.)

The motto for the ad-hoc committee seems to be

I came.
I saw.
I concurred.

In contrast to the ad-hoc APS committee, Ian Plimer is a professor in the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Adelaide, and author of more than 120 scientific papers on geology and seven books for the general public. He presents a stunning array of facts about the history of the earth based on real data, not on computer models.

[2] Ian Plimer, *Heaven and Earth. Global Warming: The Missing Science*, (Taylor Trade Publishing, NY, 2009).

More topics ...

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