Wong: Climate sceptics are all red herrings and quackery

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Comments 150

[Below is the text of Senator Wong's speech delivered in opening her First National Forum on Coasts and Climate Change last week. The text is presented as copied and pasted intact from the Sydney Morning Herald: http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/wong-climate-sceptics-are-all-red-herrings-and-quackery-20100218-ogb3.html?comments=73#comments

My quick, broad, indicative analysis uses the following key:

False statements

Misrepresentations and/or Misleading statements

Implied statements – false and/or unfounded

Unfounded statements or lacking data

Thus, for example, paragraphs highlighted below in red contain falsities. Those highlighted in yellow misrepresent or mislead, and so on.

Obviously, there can be a fine line between Misrepresentations, Misleading statements, Implied falsities, Unsupported claims, False statements and Unfounded statements. For ease of reading, whole paragraphs are categorized based on their contents. Some details of any such analysis can be argued. What cannot be refuted is that Senator Wong's overwhelmingly false fomenting of climate alarm is groundless. She attempts to hide the UN IPCC's comprehensive fraudulent misrepresentations of climate.

Read '*Two Dead Elephants in Parliament*', a referenced catalogue of UN IPCC fraud. It was electronically sent to all MP's and posted to all senators. It's available at: http://www.tech-know.eu/uploads/dead_elephants.pdf. Decide for yourself. I think you'll agree Senator Wong's comments are colourful.]

Penny Wong, the Federal Minister for Climate Change and Water.

It is my pleasure to welcome you to Adelaide to this first national forum on coasts and climate change.

Late last year I released the first national assessment of the implications of climate change for Australia's coasts.

Today we begin the next step towards preparing for the impact of climate change on our coasts with the opening of this national forum.

But before I do, there are two issues in the current climate change debate that I would like to take head on: the outcome at Copenhagen and debates on the science of climate change.

Copenhagen

It's true that Copenhagen did not deliver the perfect outcome – but it is equally true that there is plenty to build on.

The reality is that the Copenhagen Accord is an important and welcome step toward an effective global agreement on climate change.

It saw, for the first time, leaders agree to hold any increase in global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius.

For the first time, leaders of developed as well as developing countries agreed to take action, side by side, to deliver that objective.

For the first time, leaders agreed to a framework for a transparent system to track our progress, which is key to getting the environmental outcome the world needs.

And for the first time, leaders agreed on the finance necessary to support emissions reductions and adaptation in developing countries.

The world now has major emitters prepared to take action and to be accountable for it. The significance of this should not be overlooked or forgotten.

It's an important point - we haven't had this before. The Kyoto Protocol did not deliver

this, as it only involved emissions obligations for developed countries.

The Accord is strongly supported by both developed and developing countries.

The Accord includes pledges to cut and limit emissions from countries representing around 80 per cent of global emissions and more than 85% of the global economy.

And while we would have liked to have gone further, perhaps the most disappointing outcome of Copenhagen is the way that some politicians – including those who want to lead this nation – have smugly exaggerated the shortcomings as a justification of their position to do nothing on climate change.

This approach completely ignores a very important fact that a strong global agreement is manifestly in Australia's own national interest.

And while we may be a year or so away from the agreement we do need and ultimately want, does that mean that each of us should drop the ball until then?

Doing so – that is to say deciding not to do anything - is a decision to increase the risk for future generations. This simply isn't responsible. What is responsible is to ask ourselves the simple question: what can each of us do to help tackle climate change?

Science

That is because the evidence points to climate change happening more quickly than we previously thought.

Given recent allegations you might be excused for thinking that climate change science has been completely discredited.

Remember the people who have been barrackers for policy failure at home and abroad are the same people who have been peddling misinformation and misleading information about the science of climate change.

There is, in fact, a certain similarity between debates about the impact carbon pollution is having on our planet, and earlier debates about the impact cigarette smoke has on our health.

It's not hard to imagine these barrackers for failure as the characters in the sequel to 'Thank you for smoking', which will be called: 'Thank you for polluting.'

Given how confused debates on the science have become, I think it is important to get some facts on the table.

And I don't just mean facts like that 2009 was the second hottest year on record in Australia and the fifth hottest globally, and that 2009 finished the hottest decade in recorded history.

I refer more to the series of breathless, scandalised claims implying that we have all been hoodwinked by climate scientists, who have manipulated evidence and published bare-faced lies as part of a vast conspiracy to de-industrialise the Western world.

Those hoodwinked would have to include the Pentagon and Margaret Thatcher.

The US Special Envoy on Climate Change, Todd Stern, characterised this recent trend as:

"...People who have an agenda that is directed toward undermining action on climate change grab whatever tidbit they can find."

The claims have focused on the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – IPCC – which is no surprise, given that is the body that draws together, peer reviews and publishes the landmark 'assessment reports' every five or so years.

The IPCC 4th Assessment Report is nearly 3,000 pages long and was published three years ago. It has been referred to regularly by governments and others in explaining the need to act on climate change.

And so it follows those trying to undermine the case for action have been desperately trying to pick holes in it. Despite recent reporting, they have not been very successful. Let's look at the claims that have been made.

Last month, there were claims that a statement in the IPCC's Assessment is unfounded due to reliance on a World Wildlife Fund report. The statement suggested that 40 per cent of the Amazon rainforest could react drastically to even a slight reduction in

precipitation.

The fact is that the issues highlighted in the WWF report were drawn from peer-reviewed research published in the respected journal Nature in 1999. The author of that peer-reviewed work has confirmed that the IPCC's statement is correct. While it's true that the IPCC should have better referenced this work – this criticism hardly undermines the findings itself.

Another claim is that the IPCC's surface temperature data is contaminated with surface effects from industrialisation and urban heat.

The evidence, however, suggests the effect of urban heat on temperature records is limited and doesn't have a major influence on overall averages.

Moreover, to just look at that data alone is cherry picking. Evidence for global warming comes not only from air temperature records, but is backed by measurements of warming in oceans (which cover more than two thirds of our planet), the lower atmosphere (through weather balloons and satellites) and ice and snow melt.

Another claim is that the IPCC exaggerated economic losses from catastrophes attributed to climate change.

The IPCC has described these claims as “misleading and baseless". The scientist has gone on the record to say his peer-reviewed scientific paper was correctly represented in the IPCC report.

There may well be dispute about the cost of catastrophes, but the science on the link between these catastrophes and climate change has not been credibly challenged.

Finally, the IPCC chairs themselves announced that one paragraph in its 2007 Assessment relating to loss of Himalayan glaciers by 2035 was poorly based. It had been erroneously stated that 80 per cent of Himalayan glacier area would very likely be gone by 2035.

Self evidently, this is an error which should not have happened. But it has been corrected.

And it does nothing to change the volumes of information in other parts of the IPCC report and other more recent reports, such as the Copenhagen Diagnosis, highlighting the link between global warming and increased melting of glaciers and ice-caps.

So all the claims about climate change science being unreliable have no credible foundation.

An important part of science is continuously improving our knowledge and processes for uncovering and documenting that knowledge.

It is healthy for any organisation to regularly focus on opportunities to review procedures and approaches. And there is always room for improvement.

But to suggest that recent claims about the IPCC's work either undermine its conclusions, or the broader evidence of climate change, is dangerously wrongheaded.

It is probably the single most exhaustively reviewed scientific document ever produced. It has been intensely scrutinised and few errors found.

The fundamental conclusions of the science presented in the IPCC report are robust, and based on many sources.

With the exception of the Himalayan glacier claim, which has been openly addressed, none of the claims have revealed scientific errors - nor do they contradict the wealth of evidence from scientists in this country and around the world which shows human activity is contributing to climate change.

This week, for example, we've seen a report from the University of Bristol demonstrating that oceans are becoming acidic faster than at any other point during the last 65 million years, due to rising carbon pollution.

And let's not forget what our own Australian scientists are telling us.

Projections from the CSIRO and BOM show that if we don't reduce our carbon pollution, the number of very hot days over 35 degrees will more than double in Adelaide and experience nearly a 30 fold increase in Darwin by 2070.

They also tell us we can expect far more drought in our most important food bowls.

And we are also warned by CSIRO and the Bushfire CRC that this change in weather is increasing the prevalence of conditions associated with extreme fire danger in south-eastern Australia, and the number of very high and extreme fire danger days could increase by up to one quarter by 2020 and more than double by 2050.

The reality is clear, widespread and mounting evidence that our climate is changing, largely due to the carbon pollution we generate.

To quote Todd Stern again:

"The mounting evidence on the ground of what's actually happening and the growing sophistication of the modelling goes way beyond any particular set of data or any particular problems that occurred with respect to the University of East Anglia or IPCC mistakes."

And on the question of the East Anglia emails, I note that claims that these show trickery on the part of researchers have been strongly refuted. Several investigations have ensued. The first inquiry to report has been conducted by Pennsylvania State University into Dr Michael Mann, a climatologist working for their Department of Meteorology.

This inquiry cleared Dr Mann of allegations of wrongdoing, and said the following:

"They were not falsifying data; they were trying to construct an understandable graph for those who were not experts in the field. The so-called 'trick' was nothing more than a statistical method used to bring two or more different kinds of data sets together in a legitimate fashion by a technique that has been reviewed by a broad array of peers in the field."

Moreover, we need to understand these issues in the broader context – there is a wealth of evidence, within and beyond the IPCC reports, supporting the claim that carbon pollution from human activity is contributing to climate change. These claims do not change that.

Red herrings and arguments at the fringes of the debate cannot dismiss the fact that that the world is warming, nor is it justification to ignore the range of scientific work on climate change.

A question all of us should consider is what will happen in 20 years.

In 20 years time, can we seriously look our children and grand children in the eye and say we sat on our hands because of a computer hacker?

Reducing carbon pollution

Tackling climate change fundamentally requires us to wean our economies off the high polluting sources of energy that have fuelled development.

That means direct government investment in clean energy – and the Rudd Government is investing billions in low emissions technology; increasing the Renewable Energy Target by four times so that within ten years, the equivalent of all current Australian household electricity comes from renewable sources; and support for Australian households to become more energy efficient.

But above all it means a price on carbon, a price on pollution, through the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.

The CRPS caps and reduces Australia's carbon pollution for the first time ever.

The CPRS tackles the root of the problem by making polluters pay for their pollution.

And finally, the CPRS takes the money raised from the polluters and provides cash assistance to 8.1 million working families – 660 dollars a year on average.

The simple fact is if you want to reduce carbon pollution at the lowest cost to taxpayers you need an emissions trading scheme like the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.

That's why everyone from John Howard to Angela Merkel to Malcolm Turnbull to Barack Obama has embraced emissions trading.

And it's why the overwhelming majority of advocates of action on climate change support emissions trading, and everyone who opposes action on climate change is doing everything they can to obstruct emissions trading.

Over thirty countries have emissions trading in place and a number of others are working on it.

Just last week the Obama Administration reiterated its support for emissions trading in the annual Economic Report of the President.

This week, we've seen a report from economists from the International Energy Agency, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and others, endorsing the European emissions trading system. An expert from MIT put it this way: “it has put in place a system that has reduced emissions and has proven that a multinational cap and trade scheme can work.”

It is a policy that works.

And it works not just by enforcing a limit on emissions. By putting a price on carbon – by making polluters pay - it creates an economic incentive, and it will be the single biggest driver in clean development in the coming decades.

All I will say about the recently announced alternative is that it's what you get when your starting point is, and I quote the Leader of the Opposition, that climate change is “absolute crap”.

The Government's policy works, the alternative doesn't.

The Government's policy delivers reductions. The alternative would see emissions increase by 13 per cent by 2020.

The Government's policy is a responsible answer to the risk of climate change. The alternative is not.

The only question it answers is a political one – how to get through to the next election.

Adaptation

However even with strong emissions reduction action we face a stark and sobering fact – the opportunity to avoid climate change altogether has passed. It has been lost to us – this generation no longer has that opportunity.

Any effective climate change response now also needs to address the question: how do we adapt to the impacts of climate change that we cannot avoid?

Australia is the driest inhabited continent in the world; we are already vulnerable even to small variations in climate.

Adaptation will require the engagement and involvement of all, across Australia.

The Rudd Government's long term, $12.9 billion Water for the Future plan represents our biggest adaptation initiative. It prepares Australian cities and regions for a future with less rain as a result of climate change.

Coasts

Of course, one of Australia's principal adaptation challenges is preparing our coasts. Australia's coasts play a major part in our economy, our environment, and our way of life.

They hold our nation together – literally and metaphorically; it is where most Australians live, work and play, and the coast is the platform for our export economy.

But climate change threatens coastal homes and the viability of coastal industries and ecosystems.

With our coasts at the front line on climate change, facing sea level rise, storm surges and inundation, they also must be at the forefront of our efforts to adapt to climate change.

Australia's coastal zone in particular will experience the full range and impact climate change.

Late last year, I released the first national assessment of the implications of climate change for Australia's coasts.

The risks are real.

Up to 247,000 residential buildings are at risk of flooding from a 1.1 metre sea level rise. Their replacement value is up to $63 billion.

Many industries that support Australia's economy rely on use of the coastal zone. Those industries are vulnerable even to small rises in the sea level and changes to extreme

events.

Our coastal infrastructure will be affected – from low-lying airports in Brisbane or Sydney to the vital infrastructure that supports our electricity and wastewater services.

I have received the preliminary considerations from the Coasts and Climate Change Council led by Professor Tim Flannery. They note:

"Development around the Australian coast assumed that sea level and storm events would function as they have in the past. We designed our housing estates, business sites and public utilities as if the coastline and tidal levels would not change. Such assumptions are no longer valid."

Not only are our assets and environments at risk, many of our sandy beaches could erode away or recede up to hundreds of metres over the coming century. It is possible that with climate change, and without large and expensive nourishment programs, Bondi Beach, Sunshine Coast and Bells Beach may no longer be the beaches we know today.

To quote again from the considerations of the Coasts and Climate Change Council:

"Taking action to build resilience to climate change impacts will involve new approaches. Our planning systems will need to change, how we assess and share risks will need to change. There will be consequences for all coastal decision makers, from households to major businesses. This is a challenge to big for any single local government, business or even state government to handle on their own."

So, I'm very pleased to see here in Adelaide today at this climate change forum the cross-section of senior people from across Commonwealth, State and Local governments, from business, from the scientific community, research bodies and elsewhere.

It is time to roll up our sleeves and to figure out how we are going to work together as a nation to tackle the immense challenge of climate change and the coasts. It will need sound thinking, creativity and most of all it will need partnership.

Conclusion

Rising to this adaptation challenge is a task that requires the commitment of all levels of government – local, state and national – working in partnership, not just with each other, but also with business and the community. Governments, after all, can't fix everything.

A big part of the work of governments will be setting the right conditions to help business and communities adapt, as well as driving research and reform across areas as diverse as land-use planning, building codes, legal and insurance professions and the management of our valuable natural resources.

While climate change will get worse for future generations, it is not a problem that is off in the never-never. It is with us here and now.

Preparing for the climate change that is already happening is obviously the responsible thing to do.

But equally responsible is to take out the insurance of reducing the carbon pollution that is causing climate change, while we still can.

I doubt there is a politician in Canberra who has not taken out insurance on his or house, in case of fire or theft.

The chances of either are considerably smaller than likelihood that our activity is causing climate change – which is more than a 90 per cent chance.

Surely any one of us who is prepared to insure our house should be equally prepared to take out insurance for our nation, by reducing our carbon pollution.