

Re-assessing the reaction to re-assessing climate change

Our job is to cut through forced consensus, fear and place policy issues in the public domain. We exist to test the most cherished of opinions where they impact on the decisions of our government, and challenge well-funded lobby groups. Where it prevents the South African government from taking sound energy and economic decisions, the global climate lobby is a hindrance to our development.

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Last week the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) released a [policy paper](#) on climate change. It questioned the prevailing consensus on climate thinking, suggesting that while the global climate was changing, this had been the case throughout time, and that man had at best a minimal influence on current changes. While a surprising number of groups and individuals thanked us for helping them to “think differently”, there was much critical reaction. I would estimate responses sent directly to us have been 30% for and 70% against.

The counter-reaction was expected. The climate lobby does not want the arguments we raised to be aired because they are worried that their case is weaker than they put forth. The lobby has become a multi-billion dollar business, and with the dollars come vested interests, and special interest groups. Those groups are now the most prominent manifestation of “big government” getting together with “big business” to force a particular set of views upon the world (on this point read Ivo Vegter’s paper on the climate lobby that was published in the *Daily Maverick* this week). They rely on fear and forced consensus to attract funding – too often aided and abetted by an uncritical media.

The critical responses we received came from two sources. The first were individuals and organisations, some very prominent and well-funded by climate dollars, who said – often angrily - that the debate on climate had been “closed for some years” and demanded to know why we were opening it up again. It was also suggested that such a debate should only be conducted among accepted “climate scientists”. If anything, these reactions served to confirm just how important it is to open the debate up again, and place it in the public domain. What scientists are scared of re-engaging such a debate and what sort of academic debate is officially ‘closed’? Why must it only be conducted among a small number of climate scientists, all of whom would appear to hold the same view? Why does the climate lobby not want the debate held in public? Surely if their ideas were sound they should easily win any debate.

The second set of critical responses came from a group that we can only describe as the climate cult. One man suggested that in publishing an alternative set of arguments we had crossed a line to become “the ISIS of think tanks”. Just think about that - being accused of being equivalent to ISIS for publishing a different opinion. Two journalists sent strongly worded notes making it clear that they would not report on our paper. Journalists – who did not have any special qualifications in physics or a related field - making a call on what their readers should be allowed

to read about climate change. These types of responses showed the extent to which the climate lobby has crossed a line to become a climate cult. The lobby feeds the cult, and the cult defends the lobby. Question the existence of their god and they all get quite carried away.

A South African journalist asked why we were even entering the debate at all. This was in itself an unusual question as we never get asked why we publish on security, education or other areas of policy. The answer is that we are a policy think-tank that seeks to advance decisions that will increase investment-led economic growth with a view to improve the living standards of all South Africans, and position our country as a leading emerging market. Our job is to cut through forced consensus, fear and place policy issues in the public domain. We exist to test the most cherished of opinions where they impact on the decisions of our government, and challenge well-funded lobby groups.

Where it prevents the South African government from taking sound energy and economic decisions, the global climate lobby is a hindrance to our development. At worst it is a manifestation of neo-colonial interference in the affairs of African nations. Most African people lag far behind the living standards of Western nations. They must be allowed to improve their material well-being by growing their economies and engaging in industrial development. It is a cruelty on an unprecedented scale to lobby for policies – such as carbon taxes – that will impede that. A carbon tax, for example, would introduce new costs which ordinary South African families – already under great financial strain – would have to pay while at the same time reducing the competitiveness of South Africa as an investment destination.

When “big business” and “big government” get together, as they have in the climate lobby, these issues are often ignored. Hence, we have explicitly stated that South Africa should not adopt a carbon tax. There has been some important writing in the United States about how large corporations, and Western governments, have an interest in forcing emerging markets to adopt Western climate norms in order to level the economic playing field by increasing the cost base of those emerging market economies. A senior European diplomat even put it directly to me that he disapproved of what we had written.

For a government that is often big on “sovereignty”, and disdainful of international interference in its affairs, the South African government has been too quick to surrender its critical faculties to the global climate lobby. We want the South African government to reassess its position on climate change and take decisions that put South Africa and its people first. Hence, we are allowing it access to information that is all too often not in the public domain, so that it can take informed policy choices. That is what think-tanks do in free and open societies.

That it has been possible for us to do this on a global scale is wonderful. By international standards we are a small group – and furthermore have the disadvantage of being based away from the big players in Washington, London and Brussels – but despite that, the “little IRR in Johannesburg” has been able to get the global climate lobby in a huff. This is why we published a week before COP21 – to ensure our paper got attention. Emerging market think-tanks should be doing more of this by locating the interests of their countries within the global policy domain. However, we are far from alone in the position we have taken. Two of the world’s leading think tanks, the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, now promote related views.

Our critics are of course free to write their own policy papers and place them in the public domain as we have done. That is how this debate should be conducted. We thank them all for their interest in our work and look forward to reading their papers in response. Read our paper. It may make you reconsider what you thought you knew.