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Business

FINANCIAL POST

Scary stories

By Peter Foster, Financial Post June 6, 2009

This past week -- as delegates from 182 countries circled and plotted in Bonn about how to avoid the great upcoming Copenhagen Climate Policy Collapse -- there appeared the usual bumper crop of stories that either regurgitated climate alarmism, positively promoted it, or otherwise carried the banner for pointless policy upheaval.

Despite Al Gore's claims of too much denialism in the press, the mainstream media has been almost entirely captured by his alleged "Inconvenient Truth." The skeptical voices that have always been essential to science--and freedom--have been marginalized and ridiculed, and nonsense walks proudly on stilts.

Typical was widespread and unquestioning coverage of a report this week from the UN claiming that climate change was killing more than 300,000 people a year. The report's figures were found to have been entirely manufactured, but that revelation received virtually no coverage.

On Wednesday, came a segment on the CBC's The National suggesting--as Peter Mansbridge intoned with furrowed brows -- that "The California coast is in deep trouble from global warming, and we mean deep."

The one straight statistic to emerge from the subsequent piece was that the sea level had risen by 20 centimetres in San Francisco Bay over the past hundred years. However, reporter Leslie McKinnon quickly switched to forecasts of sea level rises of "a metre to a metre and a half" made by somebody called Peter Gleick of something called the Pacific Institute. Mr. Gleick declared that sea level rises were accelerating -- or at least would be--because climate change was happening "faster and faster."

A bureaucrat from the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission suggested that the situation was like that of the Titanic: "The ship can't be turned around." Local airports might be under water soon (unless of course the authorities simply raised the levees that already protected them).

Not to be outdone, Ms. McKinnon claimed that Silicon Valley's "high-tech new cities risk being drowned by the rising sea." But while Palo Alto may be only 23 feet above sea level, that still leaves it 18 feet of clearance after the great projected inundation. The City Mothers also have a century or so to think up a plan.

The segment then moved into Water World-type scenarios of floating cities before introducing Meg Caldwell, a Stanford environmental lawyer, who claimed that 60% of the California coastline was eroding. She appeared to be praying for a Californian Katrina as a wake up call (although we might remember that Katrina, despite Al Gore's assertions, could in no way be linked to man-made climate change).

In the let's-put-on-a-brave-green-face category, a story appeared in the British newspaper The Guardian under the headline "Tide turns in favour of green energy: Turning point as renewables attract more global investment than fossil fuels."

Achim Steiner, who heads the UN Environment Programme, was quoted as saying that "There have been many milestones reached in recent years, but this report suggests renewable energy has now reached a tipping point where it is as important --if not more important --in the global energy mix than fossil fuels."

Hardly. The study in question referred only to electricity production. Renewables such as wind and solar in fact account for only a minuscule portion of global energy demand and are projected to continue to do so for decades. Indeed, the further you got in the story, the more you realized that indicators were actually pointing in the opposite direction from the headline, and that expenditures on alternative energy were now slumping, having dropped by 53% in the first quarter of 2009. The story also reluctantly acknowledged that private funding for renewables had dried up, and that renewable share prices had collapsed.

As an indicator of the study's objectivity, meanwhile, its author, Michael Liebreich, was quoted calling for even more state intervention to support green energy, including "requiring state-supported banks to raise lending to the sector." Mr. Liebreich appeared not to remember that the reason that banks had to be "state-supported" was because that they had been "required" to hand out subprime mortgages. Nevertheless, The Globe and Mail was so impressed by the story that it reprinted it under the equally misleading headline: "Renewables beat fossil fuels in race for cash."

One event that received virtually zero coverage in the main-stream media this week was the Heartland Institute's Third Annual International Conference on Climate Change, which took place in Washington. That was perhaps because the conference presented climate scientists and economists who refuted fashionable alarmism and subjected the Waxman-Markey bill -- which seeks to impose a cap-and-trade system for carbon dioxide emissions -- to withering analysis, concluding that it would destroy jobs, raise prices and do nothing for the climate.

At the conference, the Cato Institute's Patrick Michaels suggested that the success of alarmism had a lot to do with the absence of fact-checking in the media. But while that may be true, it seems as much due to the fact that many in the media regard themselves as eco-warriors. As such, they never let the facts stand in the way of a good, scary environmental story.

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