

Reconciliation in the Climate Change Debate

In the politics of climate change, we cannot say that 'the science is settled' or 'the debate is over'. The international endeavour to reduce Carbon Dioxide emissions has had severe setbacks. The key science-policy institution, the IPCC, that so recently won the Nobel prize, is still driven by acrimony over its leadership. Climate-change science is a main target of the ascendant populist Right in the U.S.A. and elsewhere. While the utilitarian value of science is well appreciated in many countries, the loss of trust in its moral authority is taking time to be repaired.

Science has experienced many debates in its past history, some of them spilling over into politics. This current internal dispute, where opinions are sharply polarised and even the legitimacy of participants is questioned, needs attention. There will be other issues like climate change, where grave dangers are announced, but where decisive policy making is impeded by unresolved debates on the science. These debates will inevitably involve issues of uncertainty and quality, and will be driven by considerations of values, reputations, loyalties, power and profit.

Can these current disputes in the scientific sphere be settled by normal scientific procedures? We see here a scene that is very different from the 'discovering facts' of the less sophisticated scientist, or even of the 'testing of hypotheses' or 'solving puzzles' of the philosophers. Every claim and criticism is supported by a complex structure of previous claims and criticisms, conditioned by judgements on the strength and relevance of the evidence and even on the competence, probity and legitimacy of the authors. For guidance on untangling all this, we are better served by history, sociology and jurisprudence than by the conventional philosophy of science.

We believe that the possibility of harmful climate change is real, and that the resolution of the science (even recognition of its inherent uncertainties) is urgent. We suggest that this is an occasion when the approach and techniques of conflict resolution can be applied to a scientific dispute. This does not require the participants to accept the competence and integrity of their opponents; rather it starts from the assumption that those elements are absent. It makes only the minimal assumption that everyone agrees that there is a problem to be solved, which will not go away or be achieved by the surrender of one side.

We propose a workshop to function as a first step in a process of reconciliation on climate change science. There is already a precedent: Judith Curry and her colleagues agreed to debate in a nonviolent way in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and of the dearth of the expected immediate successors. The aims of the workshop will be modest: to establish the basis for further dialogue and a more inclusive follow-up. If we can identify some key issues on which progress is possible (including the management of uncertainty), and also find other persons who at this stage would be willing to be involved, it will have achieved its purpose.

The workshop would start with a review of the climate change dispute as a scientific-political phenomenon. As in any contentious issue, there are not just two sides but a spectrum of positions, perhaps on several dimensions. At the extremes are those who are not prepared to dialogue; we hope that there is now sufficient middle ground for some progress to be made. The workshop would then proceed to the

identification of some key scientific issues (possibly including the management of uncertainty) whose resolution could be crucial in moving the issue forward. This will be the scientific core of the workshop; the aim will be mutual exploration rather than disputation. We could then become acquainted with some approaches to nonviolent dispute resolution, and decide which would be most effective in this present novel situation. Finally we would start to plan for a follow-up meeting. If this workshop is a success, it could serve as model for the adoption of the nonviolent approach to conflict resolution in similar disputes in science at present or in the future. This could become one of the most important aspects of its work.

The organisers are aware that many participants had been looking forward to a debate on the scientific questions. We have come to believe that at this time that would be premature. If the term 'science' presupposes consensual public knowledge, then (unless we obliterate one side of the dispute) this is just what we don't have. Our urgent problem is not one of uncertainties but of conflicting and mutually excluding certitudes. The philosophy of science has not provided us with a theory of honest error. There are no crucial experiments to resolve the debate; instead we need nonviolent conflict resolution. All serious negotiations require talks-about-talks (even with more –about-talks) as preliminaries. This is where we believe that we are, in relation to the climate change dispute. There will probably be no decisive or dramatic results of this workshop, but we hope that it will lay foundations for future dialogues, on this issue and eventually others.

AGP and JRR