

Goodbye, kind word

People choose to believe the climate change deniers
because the truth is harder to accept

“**W**e live,” the cover story of the current Spectator tells us, “in the happiest, healthiest and most peaceful era in human history.” And who in the rich world would dare to deny it? The aristocrats, the cardinals, Prince Charles, the National Front, perhaps: those, in other words, whose former social dominance has been usurped by the times. But the rest of us? Step forward the man or woman who would exchange modern medicine for the leech, sewerage for the gutter, the washing machine for the mangle, European Union for European wars, relative democracy for absolute monarchy. Not many takers, then.

But the party is over. In 2,000 words, the Spectator provides plenty of evidence to support its first contention: “Now is good.” It provides none to support its second: “The future will be better.” Ours are the most fortunate generations that have ever lived. They are also the most fortunate generations that ever will.

Let me lay before you three lines of evidence. The first is that we are living off the political capital accumulated by previous generations, and that this capital is almost spent. The massive redistribution which raised the living standards of the working class after the New Deal and the second world war is over. Inequality is rising almost everywhere, and the result is a global resource grab by the rich. The entire land mass of Britain, Europe and the United States is being re-engineered to accommodate the upper middle classes. They are buying second and third homes where others have none. Playing fields are being replaced with health clubs, public transport budgets

with subsidies for roads and airports. Inequality of outcome, in other words, leads inexorably to inequality of opportunity.

The second line of evidence is that our economic gains are being offset by social losses. A recent study by the New Economics Foundation suggests that the costs of crime have risen by 13 times in the past 50 years, and the costs of family breakdown fourfold. The money we spend on such disasters is included in the official measure of human happiness: gross domestic product. Extract these costs and you discover, the study says, that our quality of life peaked in 1976.

But neither of these problems compares to the third one: the threat of climate change. In common with all those generations which have contemplated catastrophe, we appear to be incapable of understanding what confronts us.

Three wholly unexpected sets of findings now suggest that the problem could be much graver than anyone had imagined. Work by the Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen suggests that the screening effect produced by particles of soot and smoke in the atmosphere is stronger than climatologists thought; one variety of man-made filth, in other words, has been protecting us from the effects of another. As ancient smokestacks are closed down or replaced with cleaner technology, climate change, paradoxically, will intensify.

At the same time, rising levels of carbon dioxide appear to be breaking down the world's peat bogs. Research by Chris Freeman at the University of Bangor shows that the gas stimulates bacteria which dissolve the peat. Peat bogs are more or less solid carbon. When they go into solution the carbon turns into carbon dioxide, which in turn dissolves more peat. The bogs of Europe, Siberia and North America, *New Scientist* reports, contain the equivalent of 70 years of global industrial carbon emissions.

Worse still are the possible effects of changes in cloud cover. Until recently, climatologists assumed that, because higher temperatures would raise the rate of evaporation, more clouds would form. By blocking some of the heat from the sun, they would reduce the rate of global warming. But now it seems that higher temperatures may instead burn off the clouds. Research by Bruce Wielicki of Nasa suggests that some parts of the tropics are already less cloudy than they were in the 1980s.

The result of all this is that the maximum temperature rise proposed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2001 may be a grave underestimate. Rather than a possible 5.8 degrees of warming this century, we could be looking at a maximum of 10 or 12. Goodbye, kind world.

Like every impending disaster (think of the rise of Hitler or the fall of Rome), this one has generated a voluble industry of denial. Few people are now foolish enough to claim that man-made climate change isn't happening at all, but the few are still granted

plenty of scope to make idiots of themselves in public. Last month they were joined by the former environmentalist David Bellamy.

Writing in the Daily Mail, Bellamy asserted that “the link between the burning of fossil fuels and global warming is a myth”. Like almost all the climate change deniers, he based his claim on a petition produced in 1998 by the Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine and “signed by over 18,000 scientists”. Had Bellamy studied the signatories, he would have discovered that the “scientists” included Ginger Spice and the cast of MASH. The Oregon Institute is run by a fundamentalist Christian called Arthur Robinson. Its petition was attached to what purported to be a scientific paper, printed in the font and format of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. In fact, the paper had not been peer-reviewed or published in any scientific journal. Anyone could sign the petition, and anyone did: only a handful of the signatories are experts in climatology, and quite a few of them appear to have believed that they were signing a genuine paper. And yet, six years later, this petition is still being wheeled out to suggest that climatologists say global warming isn’t happening.

But most of those who urge inaction have given up denying the science, and now seek instead to suggest that climate change is taking place, but it’s no big deal. Their champion is the Danish statistician Bjorn Lomborg. Writing in the Times in May, Lomborg claimed to have calculated that global warming will cause \$5 trillion of damage, and would cost \$4 trillion to ameliorate. The money, he insisted, would be better spent elsewhere.

The idea that we can attach a single, meaningful figure to the costs incurred by global warming is laughable. Climate change is a non-linear process, whose likely impacts cannot be totted up like the expenses for a works outing to the seaside. Even those outcomes we can predict are impossible to cost. We now know, for example, that the Himalayan glaciers which feed the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, the Mekong, the Yangtze and the other great Asian rivers are likely to disappear within 40 years. If these rivers dry up during the irrigation season, then the rice production which currently feeds over one third of humanity collapses, and the world goes into net food deficit. If Lomborg believes he can put a price on that, he has plainly spent too much of his life with his calculator and not enough with human beings. But people listen to this nonsense because the alternative is to accept what no one wants to believe.

We live in the happiest, healthiest and most peaceful era in human history. And it will not last long.