

Singing in the Rain

26 January 2011

In the past 2-3 weeks I received a deluge of nasty-language messages saying that I should be fired, deported, run over, etc. Such a sudden burst of malice seems unlikely to be spontaneous.

Perhaps recent articles and internet stories provided stimulation, e.g., an article by Pat Michaels in the Washington Times and a statement by Richard S. Courtney on a blog. Michaels distorts the facts¹ and uses quotes out of context. The Courtney statement,

"At the Kingsnorth Trial Dr Hansen spoke as an Expert Witness. His testimony was a disgrace in that he asserted global warming is so severe a problem that actions intended to damage the power station (or any other coal-fired power station) are justified because the benefit of the electricity the power station provided was outweighed by the great harm being done by its CO₂ emissions.

The terrorists (who had attacked the power station, caused its temporary stoppage, and caused costly damage) were acquitted.

Dr Hansen is employed by an agency of the US government (i.e. NASA) and the value of his expert opinion is provided by that employment.

Sending an agent of the US government to assist terrorists acting in the UK could be considered to be an act of war. It is certainly not a friendly act by a country that is an ally of the UK.",

mischaracterizes my testimony. But it is worth discussing, because it indirectly brings up the key issue: the intergenerational injustice of human-made climate change.

It's relevant that Courtney chose Kingsnorth, not the Ratcliffe-on-Soar trial in Nottingham². Both testimonies were at the request of young people on trial (it's hard to decline, being part of the generation causing the problem that they are beginning to recognize and protest against).

The essence of [my testimony](#), in both trials, was that the evidence for human-caused climate change is clear. I emphasized that the UK government, the fossil fuel industry, and the utility EON were aware of the effect of continued coal-burning on the future of young people. But instead of addressing the problem effectively, they engaged in greenwash. I concluded that recognition of this situation, of the need for urgent reductions of CO₂ emissions to protect the lives and property of young people and future generations, to avoid impacts on future sea level,

¹ Michaels refers to greenhouse gas scenarios A, B, C in our 1988 paper, failing to note that precisely measured greenhouse gas climate forcing since 1988 fall almost exactly on our scenario B, which we had described as the most likely. Our climate model did a good job of simulating global temperature change, predicting a warming that so far is about 1/3 greater than observations – just about what we should expect, because the model used in that paper had sensitivity 4.2°C for doubled CO₂, while we now know that real world sensitivity is 3°C.

Michaels also has the facts wrong about a 1988 interview of me by Bob Reiss, in which Reiss asked me to speculate on changes that might happen in New York City in 40 years assuming CO₂ doubled in amount. Michaels has it as 20 years, not 40 years, with no mention of doubled CO₂. Reiss verified this fact to me, but he later sent the message: "*I went back to my book and re-read the interview I had with you. I am embarrassed to say that although the book text is correct, in remembering our original conversation, during a casual phone interview with a Salon magazine reporter in 2001 I was off in years. What I asked you originally at your office window was for a prediction of what Broadway would look like in 40 years, not 20. But when I spoke to the Salon reporter 10 years later - probably because I'd been watching the predictions come true, I remembered it as a 20 year question.*" So give Michaels a pass on this one -- assume that he reads Salon, but he did not check the original source, Reiss' book.

² Nottingham is a hard place to get to and escape from during a December snowstorm! By the way, contrary to Courtney's implication, I was on my own time at my own expense.

extinctions of animal and plant species, and regional climate disruption, was a factor that could lead reasonable people to take urgent actions to deeply reduce CO₂ emissions.

Kingsnorth defendants, who were Greenpeace activists, were acquitted. Ratcliffe defendants, much more numerous and younger, were convicted. By the judge's admission, the young people at Ratcliffe had glowing references from peers and professionals: honest, sincere, conscientious, intelligent, committed, dedicated, caring. Why the different verdict?

I can only give my impressions. The Kingsnorth jury, nine women and three (some young) men were intently interested – you could have heard a pin drop during my testimony. I anticipated acquittal. Nottingham had a different feel. Perhaps partly due to the freezing weather and snow, or the fact that the English Midlands is coal country – or at least was until Margaret Thatcher in effect shut down most mines. No doubt the jury in Nottingham was fair-minded, but they were more severe in their judgment about whether young people were justified in taking actions to draw attention to the urgency of the situation and its intergenerational injustice.

The Ratcliffe jury, older than the defendants, members of the generation most responsible for creating the climate problem that young people will need to deal with, surely became aware of that fact during the trial.³ Yet, unlike the Kingsnorth verdict, they voted for conviction. Why?

I believe that part of the reason may be change of public perception of this topic between the Kingsnorth and Ratcliffe trials. Media and governments allowed science and pseudo-science to have equal weight, "fair and balanced". Relentless repetition of minor flaws in telephone-book-thick IPCC reports created the public impression that the science may be flawed, even while observations of climate change strengthened and the urgency of action increased. And so on.

Yes, it may be said, but young people are free to also influence public opinion. However, consider this [Heartland chart](#) as an example of what young people are up against. People carrying out these tasks are professional warriors for special interests, well-funded to make the case that global warming and climate disruption are a hoax. Their message is repeated relentlessly. Note that the "free market ideas" phrase in the Heartland bottom line is Orwellian double-speak. They mean the opposite, they want business-as-usual, with fossil fuels subsidized and not required to pay their costs to society.

Dear grandchild, this is a monster that you must face. You will need to figure it out. I am sorry. But it is the shape of our democracy today, which we bequeath to you.

The incongruity of how we have come to this irrational⁴ situation brings me to the topic of singing. Lester Brown put me in touch with Raffi Cavoukian, suggesting that Raffi's work on child honoring and my book, *Storms of My Grandchildren*, share a common theme.

³ I suspect that Courtney mentioned Kingsnorth, and not Ratcliffe-on-Soar, because he realizes the Ratcliffe trial does not look so good – old geezers convicting young people for being concerned about their future.

⁴ Irrational because by their nature parents are protective of their children's best interest – and because the actions needed to deal with climate change and fossil fuel addiction make sense for most people for many reasons.

Raffi is the children's troubadour known to millions for his songs Baby Beluga, Banana Phone and many others. Millions of "Raffi's children" are now young adults. Raffi understands the importance of uniting the themes of child honoring and addressing the climate change issue. See <http://www.raffinews.com/> from which you can also connect to <http://childhonouring.org/>

Raffi has written an essay, [The Right to a Future](#), which deserves to be widely distributed. I believe that a [shortened version](#) was posted by Huffington Post.

Bottom line: The essence of the potential climate tragedy is its intergenerational injustice, and the fact that effective approaches that could avert the tragedy make sense for many reasons.

It is important that the public recognize this situation as soon as possible. However, that surely will happen eventually, because Mother Nature will help make the story clear. What is more important, in my opinion, is that people who are aware of this situation must have a better understanding of what actions are required to address the matter.

In my opinion, the heart-breaking aspect of the tragedy, if it occurs, is that well-meaning people who recognized the problem promoted non-solutions (e.g., cap-and-trade-with-offsets).

The fundamental fact, as sure as the law of gravity, is that as long as fossil fuels are the cheapest energy⁵, somebody will keep burning them. The only workable solution is a simple honest rising fee collected at the source from fossil fuel companies and distributed 100 percent to the public. I won't harp again on the reasons why all of these characteristics are essential, other than to say the public is not stupid, they will not accept another tricky government program torqued by special financial interests.

Finally, some notes of optimism. About 500 students participated in a carbon tax workshop at Wesleyan University. Highlights are at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmxsNpFAehI>

Also Andres Forno has proposed the following one sentence summary of fee-and-dividend, in English and Spanish, which he hopes the public can appreciate:

Science already proved that to avoid global warming human suffering, the carbon content of fossil fuels must be progressively taxed on all world economies, returning all collected monies in equal parts to the inhabitants of each economy to reward ways of life and activities that cause less damage to our common atmosphere.

La ciencia ya probó que para disminuir el calentamiento global que está haciendo sufrir a la humanidad, hay que aplicar un impuesto al contenido de carbono de los combustibles fósiles en todas las economías del mundo, que sea progresivo y que reparta TODO lo obtenido en partes IGUALES a los habitantes de cada economía para premiar los estilos de vida y actividades que causan menos daño a nuestra atmósfera común.

Jim Hansen

⁵ They are cheapest only because they are not made to pay their costs to society.