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Creating a climate of credibility

IPCC needs to make strong apology and reform procedures immediately

As climategate, glaciergate, amazongate and a general outbreak of scepticism batter the IPCC, reactions can be slotted into two big clusters. Policymakers, statesmen and governments in general have basically echoed IPCC chairman Rajendra Pachauri's assertion that a mistake or two should not be used to rubbish reports that together represent the biggest body of scientific work undertaken on climate change. The UK climate secretary says it would be wrong to allow today's controversies to damage long-term efforts to cut carbon emissions. The Bhutanese PM says that it's beside the point to chastise the IPCC when rapid changes in surroundings are visible all around us. The strongest statement of support has come from our own Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, who says IPCC's core message remains unchallenged, that greenhouse gas concentrations in atmosphere are indeed leading to a change in climate—impacting temperature, rainfall and sea levels.

On the other hand, calls for Pachauri's ouster from IPCC chairmanship are still going strong in the blogosphere that's been at the heart of a gathering storm. This sphere has traditionally been considered the sceptics' partisan stronghold.



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Snide and unsubstantiated annotations on Pachauri's lifestyle, alongside personalised smear campaigns against allied climate activists, didn't do its credibility any good. In such a context, Nicholas Stern could state with authority that while those with any kind of views on science or economics could have their say, this did not mean that unscientific muddle also had the right to be recognised as a searing insight.

But the fact of the matter is that the blogosphere's profile has changed in recent years. It now boasts more and more credible, scientific voices. For example, it has raised good questions about how numbers were totalled for the 2006 Stern Review—40% of the original projections about the cost of unmitigated climate change were allegedly based on 'misuse' of a single study. By the time the Cambridge University Press published the review, some of the predictions were watered down but without the benefit of an appropriate, academically acceptable corrigendum. Similarly, conclusions drawn from unsubstantiated work appear to be bedeviling the IPCC's research process too. What Pachauri and the most ardent of his defenders are suggesting is that pointing out flaws in the IPCC's methodology or attribution process amounts to undermining the international resolve to cut emissions. This is not a fair characterisation.

To inquire, ask questions and manifest curiosity—why should any of this be akin to pulling the rugs from under the IPCC, or its role of creating a global policy consensus on how to tackle global warming? That

a National Institute of Himalayan Glaciology is being set up in India will add to a data set that remains rather sketchy till date, but why should this threaten the IPCC's authority?

Let's take a look back at when Pachauri was elected as IPCC chair. The year was 2002. By the standards of the fast-moving discourse on climate change, that's almost ancient history. George W Bush was the then US president, the one who pulled the country away from the Kyoto protocol, calling it an unrealistic and ever-tightening straitjacket. Bush also defended this decision on the basis of "the incomplete state of scientific knowledge of the causes of, and solutions to, global climate change." So, when the then IPCC chief Robert Watson lost the election to Pachauri, many environmentalists (they were fewer in number then) were outraged. E-mails they forwarded to each other made much of an Exxon memo to the White House that asked for help in replacing Watson as he was "too aggressive" on climate change. Al Gore called Pachauri the "let's drag our feet candidate," reflecting the environmental lobby's feeling that the Indian would be a less forceful, effective and committed campaigner of a change in global energy policies. It must also be remembered that Watson was hand-picked by Gore in the Bill Clinton times, and the Europeans had pushed (unsuccessfully) for Watson's reelection.

But Pachauri defied sceptics to deliver an aggressive climate change agenda—including taking on both the big industry and the rich world head on as far as their culpabilities and responsibilities were concerned. Gore would have been eating crow by the time he climbed the stage with Pachauri in Oslo, to accept the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. Today, when Pachauri cries victimisation by anti-global warming conspirators, let's grant that he should know what he is talking about. He has been fighting them long and hard. But does any of this justify IPCC chief's refusal to apologise, step down or even come out with a list of ways in which the organisation will address issues that are so sinking its reputation today? He is calling the calls for change populist. But popularising the climate change cause has surely been the basic IPCC mandate. He says the organisation has lived up to the international gold standard in scientific assessment. Well, the winds of change forced the world economy to abandon such a standard and evolve a new one.

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