

Thinking about climate change and climate change research on Capitol Hill.

A two day visit of Hans von Storch and Eduardo Zorita,
19 and 20 July 2006

During two days of listening to House members and talking with staffers of House and Senate and lobbyists, mainly from the GOP (republican) side, we perceived the situation as such:

- 1) The *democrats* consider the “scientific evidence” sufficient for political action. The hockey-stick does not play a particular relevant role in the argument, since other independent evidence would sufficiently support the assessment that we are presently, and will continue to do so in the future, changing climate. They presented the usual cocktail of alarmist/real impacts as reason why regulation is urgently needed.

No urgent need for further research was voiced; not critique of the scientific process. Instead scientific claims were used in a populist manner.

- 2) Most *GOPs* did not deny the existence of emerging man-made climate change, but likely considered the intensity and the impacts less severe than the *DEMs*. In fact, the consequences of anthropogenic climate change could be insignificant and could be dealt with the normal adaptation process. Some few *GOPs* were not convinced that the present warming was not natural at all, and referred to the cooling debate in the 1970s.

The *GOPs* were very interested in the hockey-stick, not as a scientific result but in the process of arriving at, and quality controlling, the result. They considered the NRC (North) report as well as the Wegmann-report, commissioned by the US Representatives Houses Committee on Energy and Commerce, as strong evidence that the statistical procedure adopted in the MBH study was questionable or outright false, and therefore the prominent usage of the hockey-stick would not be warranted. Based on this unfavourable example, knowledge claims from climate change studies are questioned in general, because in the case of the hockey-stick the dominant science (IPCC-related?) groups failed to guarantee a sufficient level of quality control in the scientific process and did not allow replication by independent groups (i.e., McIntyre and McKittrick and Wegmann).

We consider it probable that after having now seen the questioning of the replicability (and thus, validity) of paleo-climatic reconstructions, similar doubts concerning other key arguments in the climate change debate, in particular climate models, will be voiced in some future.

An interesting detail was that one staffer spoke about a “discounting” of scientific results conditional upon in which journal the result was published. “Science” is associated with a low level of credibility whereas GRL is considered a generally “good” source. The same staffer explained that the political system would be used to deal with uncertainties. Thus, it would be best for science to present the full range of uncertainties to policymakers, so that these can up with their choice of best action. The alternative, namely to present a “consensus”-science would not be that well received.

Our major conclusion of the situation is that we are facing a crisis of credibility of climate change studies in the US political arena. In the US, one group, favouring action, is mainly interested in evidence not necessarily bound by good quality but which supports their political agenda of regulation, whereas the other group, reluctant to regulatory action, is voicing concern about the ongoing ability of science to be an “impartial, objective” advisor (to the extent possible).

We expect that a similar attitude towards environmental sciences will also arise in Germany with a certain time lag.

Hans von Storch and Eduardo Zorita

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