Defending the Penguin Army: An Inconvenient Truth*
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Sir John Houghton, former co-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s scientific assessment working group, has argued that we must think of global warming as a weapon of mass destruction, on a par with nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and terrorism. Yet the most powerful state in the world, the United States, regards terrorism as a much more serious threat than global warming, even though the latter is set to cause far more destruction and loss of lives (and livelihoods) than the former. The costs of the Iraq War to the United States are now greater than the expected costs of the USA meeting its Kyoto targets. But as the UK Stern Report on the economic costs of climate change makes clear, if you don’t like the mitigation bill for global warming, just wait until you see the damage bill.

An Inconvenient Truth sets out to convince Americans, and anyone else who needs persuading, that the problem of global warming is deadly serious, frighteningly real and already under way. Directed by Davis Guggenheim, this is essentially a documentary of a lecture by Al Gore. However, this is no ordinary talking-head lecture. Al Gore’s finely honed slide show, with its masses of graphs, images, cartoons (by Matt Groening, creator of The Simpsons), a few carefully timed one-liners and other props, educates, shocks, and at times entertains viewers about global warming and its implications for life on Earth. In the film, Guggenheim fractures and personalises the lecture by interpolating some defining moments in Al Gore’s life-story and political career, including his attempts over a period of more than 30 years to convince a sceptical America that it needs to change its ways. In fact, An Inconvenient Truth is not so much a movie as a phenomenon, with its accompanying website and book, and an educational programme which includes training 1,000 ‘climate messengers’ to deliver the film’s message to community groups in the USA and, soon, also in Australia.

Within a month of its official release in US movie theatres in May 2006, An Inconvenient Truth had risen to the rank of the world’s third-highest-earning documentary, after Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11

*(Dir. Davis Guggenheim, Paramount, 2006)
(2004) at number one and then March of the Penguins (2005). There is an uncanny connection between these films. Moore’s documentary takes aim at the Bush Administration’s handling of the WMD and terrorist threats (which has landed it in a quagmire in Iraq). An Inconvenient Truth directs attention to a bigger global threat that the Bush Administration has failed to confront seriously. And since temperatures are rising faster at the poles than the Equator, our marching penguins are in the front line of climate change. Penguins also feature in the two-minute video spoof of An Inconvenient Truth circulating on YouTube – Al Gore’s Penguin Army. Here we find a grossly overweight Gore trying to scare, and sometimes hypnotise, a bunch of sleepy penguins into believing that climate change is responsible for (among other things) the crisis in the Middle East and Lindsay Lohan’s weight loss. (Interestingly, investigations by the Wall Street Journal claim that the creator of this video was not a 29-year-old amateur director by the name of Toutsmith but a Washington-based public relations firm whose clients include Exxon Mobil.)

Whereas Fahrenheit 9/11 is all about politics, in An Inconvenient Truth Gore declares in his lecture that global warming is not a political issue so much as a moral issue. Of course, the problem of global warming is a deeply political one and Gore knows this, but the film does its best to avoid partisan politics in order to reach out to Democrats and Republicans alike rather than merely preach to the converted. Whereas Michael Moore delights in thumping his ‘enemy’, Gore mostly avoids pointing the finger at his political rivals. His main concern is to review the key scientific evidence of global warming, and explain its implications, in a form that is accessible to a lay audience. He presents a choice of futures, using images of retreating glaciers, melting ice-caps, desperate polar bears, disappearing lakes, rising sea levels, and extreme weather. The simulated inundation of the site of the Twin Towers tragedy in New York by a rising ocean is especially chilling. However, his pièce de résistance, which is most likely to have his sceptics swallowing hard, is a giant graph that shows an uncanny correlation between atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations and global temperatures over a period of no less than 650,000 years, including a projection over the next 45 years. Gore tracks the projection – which rises sharply to become almost a vertical line – in an elevated accordion lift to drive home the unprecedented rate of expected warming under a business-as-usual scenario. Whereas in Greek theatre, the deus ex machina would be lowered onto the stage to resolve the hopeless situation, in this case Gore rises (and his rather modest resolution comes later in the film).

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Insofar as Gore does single out political targets, they are the spin-doctors who seek to ‘edit’ scientific findings in ways that bury ‘inconvenient truths’ for political purposes. He also shows a radical mismatch between the clear scientific consensus about the problem of global warming and its gravity in peer-reviewed scientific journals and the reporting of global warming in the popular US press, where roughly equal space and weight is given to the views of climate change sceptics. Under these circumstances, so-called balanced reporting becomes deeply biased reporting.\(^5\)

Indeed, An Inconvenient Truth is, in large measure, designed to address the widespread scepticism about global warming in the US – the world’s biggest carbon polluter. Conservative political forces in the US have worked hard to create public doubt about the science, and the seriousness, of global warming. Gore shows a brief snippet of a speech by Senator James M. Inhofe (Republican, Oklahoma), who declares that the threat of catastrophic global warming is the ‘greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people’. What he also could have shown was that Senator Inhofe, Chair of the Senate’s Environment and Public Works Committee, made this speech in 2003 during the US Senate debate over the McCain-Lieberman bill, the first major effort to introduce a carbon trading scheme in the US. Partly as result of Inhofe’s urgings, the McCain-Lieberman Climate Stewardship Act was narrowly defeated by 43 to 55. Inhofe is also a staunch supporter of Michael Crichton’s pulp-thriller novel State of Fear, which presents global warming as a fabrication and conspiracy by self-seeking environmentalists.

While most Europeans don’t need convincing, climate change scepticism has been fanned by conservative forces in the only other developed country that has defected from Kyoto. In Australia, Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources Ian MacFarlane earned notoriety for declaring during an ABC Radio interview, shortly after the Australian release of An Inconvenient Truth, that ‘It’s just entertainment, and really that’s all it is.’ A day later, the Murdoch-owned national daily, The Australian, opined that cutting carbon emissions will hurt the world’s poor (quoting approvingly from Bjorn Lomborg), yet saw no contradiction in also declaring that there is no point in Australia supporting Kyoto because it won’t make any difference while developing.


\(^6\) ABC Radio, AM Program, 11 September 2006; available at http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2006/s1737704.htm (accessed 2 November 2006). In response to a question in parliament relating to An Inconvenient Truth Ian MacFarlane declared, ‘There are three places I do not go for advice on climate change. One of them is to unsuccessful candidates for the US presidency who cannot even convince their own people that they are right. The second place is the movies ... [following an interjection] ... The third place is the Labor Party, who promote a policy that will cost jobs in Australia.’ Parliament of Australia website; available at http://parlinfo.web.aph.gov.au/piweb/view_document.aspx?TABLE=HANSARDR&ID=2612953 (accessed 2 November 2006).
countries are not on board. Australians, the editorial concluded, are better off supporting the Asia Pacific Clean Development Initiative (a purely voluntary initiative with no emissions reduction target or timetables). Curiously, another of Murdoch’s newspapers, the London Sun, declared on 11 September 2006 that ‘Too many of us have spent too long in denial over the threat from global warming. The evidence is now irresistible ...’.

However, it is Gore’s fellow citizens in ‘the land of the free’ whom he is most keen to persuade, and his selection of cultural references, jokes, cartoons, quotes and his own personal narrative make this clear. This carries international risks. Others might find parts of Gore’s personal narrative to be rather indulgent and sentimental, even smaltzy, diversions from the main scientific story. Yet while the film is certainly very Gore-centric (a point that has not escaped the attention of his critics), this is also one of the reasons the film is so interesting and successful. The ex-Vice President, and almost-President, of the US has returned to doing what he does best: promoting something he genuinely believes in. As the film makes clear, Gore has been publicising the problem of global warming since the early 1970s, but these efforts have mostly fallen on deaf ears. However, this may be about to change.

There is growing evidence, particularly at the subnational level, that Americans are ready for a shift of gear. States in the North-East have entered into a carbon trading scheme, known as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. Californian governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who presides over one of the world’s largest economies, is using his political strength to terminate global warming by joining this regional initiative while also embarking on plans to reduce emissions in California by 20 per cent by 2020. As of 19 October 2006, 320 mayors have signed the US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, which includes urging the federal government to fulfil its Kyoto responsibilities while also promising to take a range of local initiatives to promote energy efficiency and non-carbon energy sources. Even the Bush Administration has finally moved beyond a posture of official denial to a reluctant acknowledgement of the science. At the Gleneagles G8 Summit in 2005 George Bush signed a communiqué that declared: ‘climate change is a serious and long term challenge’ and that ‘we know enough to act now’. Hurricane Katrina served as a deadly wake-up call to Americans, providing a nasty taste of the kinds of extreme weather that scientists predict will happen with greater frequency.

The big question now is: what happens next? The underlying political task of An Inconvenient Truth is important but nonetheless quite modest: merely to get Americans to first base by persuading them that the problem is serious and that the need for action is urgent. But the run to second, third and especially home-base – a low-carbon America, leading a low-carbon world – will face much bigger challenges. It will no longer be possible to transcend politics with science. Nonetheless, the message Gore offers at the very end of the 100 minute film is one of hope: that there is just enough time left to prevent serious harm if we act now and we have all the necessary technologies to address the problem – all we need is the will. After all, we landed on the moon, we solved the ozone problem and we can solve this one too. The final credits roll out with a wide-ranging list of the practical things individuals can do to reduce energy use, while Melissa Etheridge belts out a characteristically gutsy song on the general theme of change. The advice is certainly helpful: switch to low energy light bulbs, adjust your thermostat, insulate your house, get an energy audit, switch to green power if you can, walk more, drive less and much more. But there are no handy tips on how to move beyond a growth-dependent consumer society, address global environmental injustices or democratically manage basic public assets like water and energy. Gore’s list provides a good illustration of what Michael Maniates has called the ‘individuation of responsibility’, which leaves existing political and economic structures unchallenged.11 But to expect Gore to tackle these questions is probably asking too much from a movie that strives to be bipartisan. And in fairness to Gore, it will be a huge achievement if he gets his viewers just to first base.

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