

Reporting of 'climate-contrarian' views

Last Updated: Saturday, April 19, 2014, 19:19

Sir, – In the article “Galway’s drowned forest shows climate change is nothing new”, 18 April, The Irish Times presents the climate contrarian views of retired NUIG geology professor Michael Williams. His unscientific cherry-picking of a series of geologic and ice age climate facts created a highly misleading picture that is entirely irrelevant to the mitigation and adaptation decisions required by us now.

Professor Williams is not a climate scientist and his lack of expertise shows. His examples of local warming in Greenland or the Atlantic are not the same as global changes as implied in the article. Williams and, in this case, The Irish Times also seem unaware that the rate of global warming currently occurring is far beyond anything known in the history of human-kind with severe consequences for civilisation and the biosphere if it is not curtailed.

‘Opinion’ pieces by non-experts, may be acceptable for politics or entertainment but on a matter of science, and one of such grave import for all our futures, knowledgeable, critical reporting is required. If serious about accurate journalism, it is the responsibility of The Irish Times and its reporters to have sufficient critical and fact checking ability to avoid supplying the public with badly misleading information on climate change, just as would be expected in reporting vaccination for example. At the very least reporters should read the IPCC report summaries.

As the recent IPCC report made clear: without rapid decarbonisation of the world economy there are likely to be limits to adaptation. We might all prefer business-as-usual, as Professor Williams seems to, but as the IPCC assessment says: “Limiting climate change will require substantial and sustained reductions of greenhouse gas emissions.”

Climate change affects all our futures, therefore our media need to work much harder and contact climate scientists for help when writing climate stories to ensure accuracy. Otherwise journalism betrays our trust in this pivotal decade.

Yours sincerely,

PAUL PRICE MSc,

(Sustainable Development),

Library Road ,

Dún Laoghaire ,

Co Dublin

Sir- I was dismayed by Lorna Siggins’s article ‘Galway’s drowned forest shows climate change is nothing new’ (The Irish Times, April 17th). The article contained a number of assertions by Micheal Williams, Professor of geology at NUIG, that are completely at odds with the consensus of climate scientists worldwide. In particular, Prof Williams’s theme “the earth behaves in cycles, with climate change an integral part of this”, suggests a basic misunderstanding of the threat of man-made climate change. In the first instance, the past climate changes cited by Professor Williams occurred over many thousands of years, allowing plants and animals time to adapt. In addition, these changes occurred at times of low (or no) human populations. The threat we face today is a climate that is changing over decades, not thousands of years, and the likely effects on a densely populated world. If some cities and nations become uninhabitable because of sea-level rise or chronic drought, it will be scant consolation that global climate also changed in the past. It is telling that in his discussion of the ice ages, Professor Williams makes no mention of the critical role greenhouse gases played as an amplifying effect in global warming. This effect is one of the main reasons climate scientists are so concerned at the recent rise in the concentration of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere, much of which is directly attributable to the burning of fossil fuels, contrary to what is stated in the article. Finally, one notes the Professor’s statement that “education and planning for the future is a substitute for panic and the spending of billions in funds to temporarily defer the inevitable”. Far from panic, there has been almost no significant action worldwide to reduce carbon emissions. As regards education, the article would have benefited greatly by the inclusion of a different point of view Yours etc

CORMAC O’RAIFEARTAIGH,

PhD FRAS,

Lecturer in physics,

Waterford Institute of Technology

© 2014 irishtimes.com