

## Opinion: Climate rhetoric undermines rational decision-making

Obama's State of the Union address employed language tricks to bolster global warming scare

BY TOM HARRIS, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 4, 2014



Tom Harris is executive director of the International Climate Science Coalition.

**NOTE: This article is from the denial camp about the issue of global warming / climate change. - cjk**

University of Florida linguist M.J. Hardman tells us “language is inseparable from humanity and follows us in all our works. Language is the instrument with which we form thought and feeling, mood, aspiration, will and act(ion), the instrument by whose means we influence and are influenced.”

It is not surprising that language has always been an important weapon of war. Delivered with rhetorical flare, language has driven ordinary citizens to perform heroic acts of self-sacrifice in defence of their countries, while pushing others to incomprehensible acts of stupidity and barbarism.

Rhetoric is key in the political battle over climate change. With global warming virtually non-existent during the past 17 years, a warming hiatus the U.K. Met Office expects to continue until at least 2018, climate warriors have intensified their use of dramatic language. The United Nations intergovernmental panel on climate change leads the way, increasing its stated confidence levels even as its forecasts diverge further from real world observations.

“Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia,” the IPCC asserted in its fifth assessment report issued in September. “Continued emissions of greenhouse gases will cause further warming. Limiting climate change will require substantial and sustained reductions of greenhouse gas emissions.”

But Americans are not impressed. According to a recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll, when asked about 13 foreign and domestic issues, respondents assigned the lowest priority to “addressing climate change.”

You would think President Barack Obama would therefore back off on climate in this year’s state of the union address. Instead, he used much of the same sort of deceptive language as in previous SOTU speeches to encourage greater support for multibillion-dollar global warming schemes.

Obama assured Americans: “the debate is settled. Climate change is a fact.” Even non-scientists recognize something is wrong with such assertions. If the debate was settled, why have global warming forecasts failed while carbon dioxide levels, the supposed driver of planetary temperature, continued to rise? Why did the IPCC say in its previous two assessment reports that the sort of extreme cold now occurring across much of the world should not be happening so frequently?

Every schoolchild knows “climate change is a fact.” Past ice ages demonstrate that climate change is normal. The only constant about climate is change.

Even as the impact of such rhetoric diminishes among educated people, other equally misleading terms have become fashionable. Obama used one in particular three times in his SOTU address: “carbon pollution.” The president boasted about his administration’s efforts “to set new standards on the amount of carbon pollution our power plants are allowed to dump into the air.”

Carbon is a solid, naturally occurring, non-toxic element found in all living things. It forms thousands of compounds, much more than any other element. Medicines, trees, oil, even our bodies are made of carbon compounds.

Pure carbon occurs in nature mainly in the forms of graphite and diamond. So, what is the “carbon pollution” Obama is concerned about? Is he speaking about soot emissions reduction? Amorphous carbon, carbon without structure, is the main ingredient in soot and that is a pollutant important to control. Power plants have already done a good job reducing soot, as they have other pollutants.

Obama is crusading against emissions of one specific compound of carbon, namely carbon dioxide. Ignoring the oxygen atoms and calling CO<sub>2</sub> “carbon” makes about as much sense as ignoring the oxygen in water and calling it “hydrogen.” That might be an effective PR tool for anti-hydro power campaigners, but most people would regard such a communications trick ridiculous.

Obama’s error is not harmless. It is part of the way language has been distorted to bolster concerns about human-caused climate change. Calling CO<sub>2</sub> carbon, or worse, carbon pollution, encourages people to think of it as something dirty and so important to restrict. Obama reinforces this misunderstanding by referring to power plants that have low CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as clean. This mistake is so entrenched that even those who oppose fashionable beliefs about climate change make it often.

Calling CO<sub>2</sub> by its proper name would help people remember that regardless of its role in climate change (a point of intense debate among scientists), CO<sub>2</sub> is really an invisible gas essential to plant photosynthesis, and so to all life. Recent studies demonstrate that worldwide crop yield has soared as CO<sub>2</sub> levels have risen. So although CO<sub>2</sub> is an “infrared absorbing gas” blamed by governments for most of the past century’s modest warming, it is no more a pollutant than is the major “greenhouse gas” in the atmosphere, water vapour.

Even the term “greenhouse effect” is misleading, since the earth’s atmosphere does not behave like a greenhouse. Greenhouses use a solid barrier (the glass roof) to prevent heat loss by convection, yet lacking such a barrier, convection accounts for about half the heat loss from earth’s surface.

Politically correct but deceptive language is dangerous because it influences millions of people, and ultimately, important government policy. People educated in science must complain loudly whenever they hear such rhetoric, especially when it is used year after year in the State of the Union.

*Tom Harris is executive director of the Ottawa-based International Climate Science Coalition ([www.climatescienceinternational.org](http://www.climatescienceinternational.org))*

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun