

WITH Ian Plimer, *Author of Heaven and Earth*



Ian Plimer, Ph.D. is chair of mining geology at The University of Adelaide and emeritus professor of earth sciences at The University of Melbourne, where he was chair and head from 1992 to 2005. He was previously German Research Foundation Chair at Munich, chair and head of geology at The University of Newcastle. He has been elected honorary Fellow of the Geological Society (London), Fellow of the Australasian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering, and fellow of numerous other scientific societies and has won several medals for science. He has published some 130 scientific papers and seven books for the general public. Four of these books have been best sellers, the latest of which is *Heaven and Earth: Global Warming - The Missing Science*. Dr. Plimer was a speaker at the Heartland Institute's 4th International Climate Change Conference held in Chicago May 16-18th, 2010. The Frontier Centre was one of 64 international co-sponsors of this event which profiled the work of 73 scientists, economists and policy experts from 23 countries.

Frontier Centre: Can you tell us a little bit about your professional background, specifically how you became interested in the global warming/climate change issue?

Ian Plimer: I'm a geologist. We look at the past. Unless one knows the past, we can not understand the present. One of the things we try to do, as geologists, is understand paleoenvironments. At every outcrop, we ask questions like: Where were we in terms of latitude? How thick was the crust? What was the climate like? What was sea level doing? As geologists, for hundreds of years been trying to work out what the past was like. The information that we were receiving about human-induced global warming was absolutely and totally incommensurate with what we geologists know from the past. This past information has been validated many, many times. For example, we know that we had six major Ice Ages within which we've had glaciations and interglacials. Two of those six Ice Ages were at sea level and at the equator. All six Ice Ages started when the atmospheric carbon dioxide content was much, much higher than today.

So, you have to ask the very simple question: How come in the past carbon dioxide didn't drive climate change but now that we're wealthy Westerners, it just happens to drive climate change? The view that human activities drive climate change is incommensurate with validated data. I wrote *Heaven and Earth* to show that the geological past gives a very different story from what we are being told. My geological colleagues concur. Climate has always changed and when we look back in time, we've had some enormous climate changes. Some of these changes which have been very rapid, far more rapid than any change measured today. The biggest climate change of all was when we had 150 million years of glaciation with 5 kilometres thickness of ice at the Equator and at sea level. We just don't understand how that great Ice Age in the Neoproterozoic formed and, if we don't understand how the biggest Ice Age of all time formed, then how the hell could we work out what's happening today?

FC: You've written a popular and influential book *Heaven and Earth* which suggests that climate change is normal. Have you been surprised by the popular response?

IP: I was very surprised by the response. The book came out after I finished writing it. It had absolutely no target at all for having it out on a certain date. As it transpired the timing was absolutely elegant. It changed politics in Australia. It's been an international best seller. I've written seven books, four of which have been good sellers or best sellers but this one has just

exceeded all the others. This I think is simply because the average person out there is not a fool yet is being treated as a fool by our political masters and arrogant scientists. They have a very good bullshit filter and their able to see when they're being fed rubbish and they just needed something authoritative to be able to hang their hat on. I didn't get the structure of the book right until about six weeks before it came out. I didn't have the structure of all the references or an introductory sequence of questions and answers. That came very late in the writing process. By travelling in airplanes three times a week for a decade, I read and summarized scientific papers on climate and geology, I had all this information and references and so I thought I'd better do something to present a different view of the planet – a view based on what the past tells us. I then wrote *Heaven and Earth* in a very intense four-month period.

FC: Which of the various theories that have been put forward to explain recent changes in temperature do you find the most compelling?

IP: The ones driven by nature. Nature doesn't really care what we think or where our ideology leads us. In the past, climates have changed due to supernova activity, due to volcanic activity, due to orbital changes, due to changes in the sun, due to changes in ocean circulation, temperature and salinity and due to changes in the landmasses. We have all those changes going on at present on planet Earth. Our planet is dynamic. We're having great changes all the time and normally when you get a coincidence of a couple of natural processes then you will have a rapid and big climate change. I'm not naïve enough to think that we humans, who only add 3.5% of the CO₂ emissions each year, can actually drive climate change. This is the thesis of human-induced climate change but it is yet to be shown that that 3.5% of total emissions, that is human emissions, drives climate and that nothing else drives climate change. To look at a very complex dynamic chaotic system called planet Earth and to consider only one very minor variable, that is carbon dioxide coming from human activity, and then to conclude that humans change climate means you've got to increase your medication!

FC: You have observed that time as a concept is being ignored in the global warming debate. What do you mean?

IP: I mean that people haven't looked at our history where we've seen the Medieval Warming, where we've seen the Roman Warming and where we've seen the Minoan Warming.

They haven't looked at archaeology where in former times we've seen the temperature has risen and then 800 or so years later we've had a rise in carbon dioxide. They haven't looked at geology where we've had enormous changes and very, very rapid changes. No matter what scale of time we use, the planet has cooled and warmed, for more than 80% of time it has been warmer than now and that change is normal. For the last 2.5 billion years we've been pulling carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and hiding it in rocks such as limestone, a very common rock. It contains 44% by weight of carbon dioxide. Limestone's everywhere. That's where the atmosphere's carbon dioxide has gone to and that's where it's still going. If we think we are greater than these natural processes then we really have an ego that's incommensurate with our role on planet Earth.

FC: The move to a emissions trading system has been a difficult one in Australia. Can you walk us through it? First, why was the Kevin Rudd government pushing so hard to get the emissions trading system through before the, now failed, Copenhagen meeting last December?

IP: I think the Australian Labor government was trying to be leaders in the world. I don't see there's any credit for being leaders in stupidity. They were trying to push through an emissions trading scheme which was, in effect, a massive new tax. The aim of this was to tax people slowly such that it didn't hurt and to appeal to the green city-based votes. Australia is not a rural country it's an urbanized country and most of urban Australia lives in the temperate southeastern corner. These are people who don't know where their food comes from. These are people who don't know where their electricity comes from. These are people who don't know they consume 220 tons per annum of commodities. I think emissions trading scheme was a mechanism to deal with city-based people who get their information off screen and to get them to vote for a left-wing government. Whereas, the people in rural areas, who are more conservative voters, know that the seasons change, know that we have great droughts, great floods, huge dust storms and great bush fires and know that we have cycles of weather, rainfall and climate. I think it was a very cynical political venture to cling on to power and to tax people more.

FC: Again, a lot of us are not familiar with Australian politics but could you please describe how the opposition Liberals replaced their leader over the ETS idea just before Copenhagen? And why?

IP: The opposition in Australia in federal Parliament is a coalition between city conservatives (Liberals) and rural conservatives (Nationals). We have state governments, as you have provincial governments, and they have an Upper and Lower House. Our federal government has a Lower House based on electorates of roughly equal population and an Upper House in which each state has 12 senators. The states with very few people, such as South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, can vote in a few green senators and independent senators but elsewhere in Australia we have a balance between the conservative coalition and the Labor party.

The Conservatives were following the view of the Labor government on human-induced climate change. A lot of the paid-up members of the conservative parties started to withdraw membership. They started to leave the party, they started an e-mail party campaign saying the emission trading policy of the Labor government and the conservative opposition was wrong and we're not going to support our party

financially or in any way unless policy is changed. Then there was a coup d'état. The conservative leader Malcolm Turnbull was rolled but only by one vote in favour of another conservative leader Tony Abbott who is on record as saying human-induced climate policy is "crap".

That changed politics. That meant that when the emission trading scheme went into parliament, the Labor majority in the Lower House gave it the stamp of approval but when it went to the Upper House, which was not controlled by Labor, it was rejected. This is a constitutional trigger for the Labor government to have a double dissolution of both houses of parliament and have a new election on the emissions trading issue. They wouldn't. They're either cowards or politically astute, I think they're both. I think the Labor government is very politically aware that if they had a double disillusion, they would place their whole political life on the line based on an unpopular emissions trading scheme.

I would argue that my book has had a very significant effect on conservative politics because I've spoken behind the scenes quite a lot to them. My book certainly came out at the right time politically. It certainly was one of the triggers where a lot of the conservatives in Australia rallied and said no we've had enough of this emissions trading scheme and we're actually going to change government.

FC: Some say that Kevin Rudd's government will be a one-term government because of his plan to make energy more expensive. Do you think that's true and if so why?

IP: There's a God in heaven, isn't there? Rudd is a typical tax and spend, left-wing Prime Minister. The way in which they work is to put their hand in someone else's pocket and take a little money and when they run out of money then the government changes. I think people have been well aware that the food and electricity costs have been going up. This is not as a result of shortages, it's a result of taxation. The government now has taken on Australia's mining industry and wants to tax the highest risk industry in Australia into extinction. The Canadian mining industry will be the benefit of our stupidity. Australia did not suffer in the global financial crisis because of the wealth generated by the mining industry. It kept Australia afloat. We, like Canada, stay afloat because of the mining and agricultural industries. We actually convert soil into food. We convert rock into metal. This is how Australia stays afloat financially.

Mr. Rudd, the Labor Prime Minister, now wants a super tax on mining companies which means that if you make more than 6% on your capital that is regarded as a super profit. This is just unbelievable. I was at the Perth Airport two weeks ago and there were 600 people there at 5 am in mining gear. These people are going to the mining centres. They all have taxis to get to the airport, they all have people that supply them with goods and services and they all vote. I think the Prime Minister has misread the Australian community. With the shelving of the emissions trading scheme by the Labor government and now challenging the only industry that's kept Australia afloat, I think the Labor Prime Minister has made a profound political error. I hope that he's a "oncer" who gets kicked out after his first and only term of office. That later this year we have a federal election, we don't know when it's going to be but it will be a turning point for Australia.

FC: If you look around the world though France's President Nicholas Sarkozy recently back pedaled on carbon taxes. When will politicians understand that anti-global warming policies based on raising energy prices

involves great costs and political risk? They don't seem to get it.

IP: Politicians, especially in Europe where people really have no idea of what they consume, are in the business of taxing the community. They're taxing us till we bleed. The politicians are only interested in staying in power and if community unrest about taxation and energy becomes profound, then governments will be voted out. Generally the swinging voters are those people who get misty eyed about green politics. It's these people that make or break politics as city votes drive which political party rules. The Western world is basically a city-based political system and the politicians are appealing to those people who will keep them in power. They're playing a very cynical game. As soon as people's food costs go up and our electricity costs go up the public become very fickle and they change politics. That's exactly what's happening in Europe and that's exactly what's happening in Australia and I suspect it will happen in many other countries especially where there's a coalition of a number of parties that try to hold the political power.

FC: What is your advice to politicians who are sitting on the fence despite enormous media pressure to do something about global warming? Let's think specifically in Canada and our politicians in Ottawa.

IP: I would argue two things. The first thing is if you are a politician, please try to use the rarest commodity out: it's called common sense. The second thing is have an understanding of the aspirations of the average person. What do they want in life? What are their costs? Look at your industries and the industries which generate wealth with have a multiplier effect. If you're shifting money from one computer to another you're not actually creating employment but if you're converting soil into wheat which then makes bread, then you're actually creating employment. I think it's a case of actually getting back to basics. Getting back to understanding your electorate's aspirations and understand how we create new wealth.

FC: Why don't our politicians come out and say there are big problems with artificially raising energy taxes? In Canada we have politicians that are still aggressively pushing the idea of fighting global warming with cap and trade.

IP: They are chasing city votes. Canada, like Australia, is a highly urbanized country. They are chasing the votes of people who have environmental viewpoints in the cities and who are driving the politics. Most politicians are lawyers who do not understand science. They think that science is run the way the law is. They're actually catering to their electorate's ideology with no understanding of the misuse of science that underpins the popular fad of human-induced climate change. There are some wonderful things in Canada. For example, Canada and Australia should get together because the two countries have 80% of the world's uranium. We could be the

Saudi Arabia of the nuclear world! We could completely control the world nuclear energy and weapons proliferation. It would be so easy to do. This is the way politicians ought to be thinking. How can we set up a scheme to screw the rest of the world and to enrich future generations? This is the way your politicians should be thinking and they should be talking to our politicians and doing the same. I do declare an interest in this matter as I have an Australian grandson and a Canadian granddaughter!

FC: Many of school kids in Canada were shown Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth* probably 4 or 5 times in the school system. Do you have the same issue in Australia?

IP: We have the same issue with propaganda, as does the UK, as does the US.

FC: But what's the answer to that?

IP: Unfortunately young children are very easily influenced, they do not have a scientific knowledge, they do not have analytical skills and they don't have critical skills. I think the answer to that is we must fight fire with fire. Young children don't vote. Older people who pay the bills of their children actually do vote. What I do and what many, many other people do is spend our lives talking to all sorts of people, to schools, to senior citizens groups, just keep talking and keep doing interviews, keep doing television and radio and stick to the message. The message is we are sending ourselves broke with a policy that's not based on science. I find it absolutely amazing that we are setting international policy in the wealthy Western countries based on what we don't know. We're actually not setting policy on what we do know. I find that bizarre. In many ways it's an expression that people are becoming anti-capitalists. They are comfortable capitalists and they don't realize how they got to be so comfortable.

FC: If you go back millions of years CO₂ of course was more prevalent, wasn't it?

IP: Yes, we've had CO₂ in the past a thousand times higher than now. That has been sequestered into limestone but, unfortunately, the general public know no geology. It's not taught in the schools. It keeps Canada alive because you've got a vibrant mining industry and it keeps Australia alive because we've got a vibrant mining industry. Geology is the window into past processes and tells us what is happening today. Critics respond by saying that geological processes are slow. Some are very slow, some are almost instantaneous. If you've got an asteroid coming through the atmosphere to hit you, you don't even get time to lift your head and say Oh shit! You're vaporized before you can even say that. So geological processes can be extraordinarily rapid. But what geology does is show us that there are great trends, cycles and great processes. We may not have the detail that we might have from the last 100 years of weather but we can actually see the big processes have taken place and these are totally and absolutely independent of carbon dioxide.