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Unthinking dogma

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Science must always be contested - even climate change

IF climate change is real -- and "if" is the operative word -- every aspect of the phenomenon needs to be picked over and analysed with the utmost rigour. It is too important for anything less. But in parts of the community, rigour and climate change have become mutually exclusive terms.

Distressingly large numbers of people have elevated climate change to something verging on a fundamentalist religion. True believers draw comfort from endlessly repeating the dogma to each other. Those who demand proof are shunned as heretics.

This approach might be fashionable, but it is dangerous. It is a reversion to a pre-enlightenment mindset that rejects the essence of the scientific method. And without the mental toughness of science, any public policy on climate change will have all the effectiveness of burnt offerings.

Science, with its questioning and testing, provides none of the comfort and certainty that comes from an article of faith. But there can be no rational response to this phenomenon without an understanding of the true nature of what the world is facing. That will only be possible if the community -- and those responsible for public policy -- are given all the facts, not just those "good" facts that support the received dogma.

In this regard, the media has a heavy responsibility to lay out all the facts -- even the "bad" facts -- and allow the debate to take its course. But in some parts of the media, this traditional approach to journalism has been displaced.

The Sydney Morning Herald gave prominence in May last year to a scientific study that said climate change had led to high winds over the Southern Ocean, which reduced its ability to soak up carbon dioxide. It was an important story that deserved prominence, because it looked like one of the world's great carbon sinks was in trouble.

And if that were true, it meant the only way to compensate would be to reduce carbon emissions, according to a scientist quoted by the Herald.

Unfortunately, "bad" facts have now emerged. But you would never know it if you relied on the Herald to keep you informed about the climate change issue. A scientific study published this week challenged the notion that the Southern Ocean carbon sink was in trouble. This study, published in the journal *Nature Geoscience*, was judged so important that the CSIRO issued a media release that summarised its findings. The CSIRO said the study had found high winds "have had little influence on the strength of the Southern Ocean circulation, and therefore its ability to absorb carbon from the atmosphere".

This does not, of course, mean climate change has been disproved. The new study does say the Southern Ocean has become warmer and fresher -- a pattern consistent with the fingerprint of climate change.

But it does suggest things are not as bleak as The Sydney Morning Herald would have its readers believe.

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