

Warming is real - and has benefits

The Deniers -- Part II

Lawrence Solomon, Financial Post

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One month ago, the world heard that global warming could lead to a global catastrophe "on a scale similar to those associated with the great wars and the economic depression of the first half of the 20th century." This assessment, from Sir Nicholas Stern, former chief economist of the World Bank, made banner headlines and led prominent leaders such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair to urge immediate action to stem global warming.

It also led some prominent environmentalists to denounce Sir Nicholas for what they deemed an outrageous study bereft of credibility. None of the environmentalists issued a stronger denunciation, or has better environmental credentials, than Richard S.J. Tol.

Tol is a Denier, to use the terminology of the "science-is-settled" camp in the increasingly polarized global warming debate. Like many other Deniers, Tol doesn't think the evidence is in on global warming and its effects, he doesn't think there's reason to rush to action, and he doesn't think that crash programs to curb global warming are called for.

Also like many other Deniers, he doesn't fit the stereotype that those who use the epithet imagine. Anything but.

Tol is no fringe outsider to the scientific debate. He is at the centre of the academic investigation of global warming, a central figure in the scientific establishment that has been developing the models and the knowledge to understand the global warming phenomenon. At the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, considered by most the authoritative body in the field, Tol is involved as an author in all three of its Working Groups. He is also an author and editor of the United Nations Handbook on Methods for Climate Change Impact Assessment and Adaptation Strategies. He is also a mover and shaker in the prestigious European Climate Forum. He takes global warming seriously and has dedicated his professional life to making a contribution for the better in climate policy and related fields.

Because of his immense reputation, the Stern report itself relied on Tol's work in coming to its conclusions. But Sir Nicholas twisted Tol's work out of shape to arrive at unsupportable conclusions.

As one example, Sir Nicholas plucked a figure (\$29 per ton of carbon dioxide) from a range that Tol prepared describing the possible costs of CO₂ emissions, without divulging that in the very same study Tol concluded that the actual costs "are likely to be substantially smaller" than \$14 per ton of CO₂. Likewise, in an assessment of the potential consequences of rising sea levels, Sir Nicholas quoted a study co-authored by Tol that referred to the "millions at risk," ignoring that the same study then suggested greatly reduced consequences for those millions due to the ability of humans to adapt to change.

Throughout his report, in fact, Sir Nicholas not only assumed worst possible cases, he also assumed that humans are passive creatures, devoid of ingenuity, who would be helpless victims to changes in the world around them. Such assumptions underpinned Sir Nicholas's claim that "the overall costs and

risks of climate change will be equivalent to losing at least 5% of global GDP each year, now and forever," and led Tol to view Sir Nicholas's conclusions as "preposterous." Tol's conclusion: "The Stern review can therefore be dismissed as alarmist and incompetent."

Tol and Sir Nicholas are worlds apart, and not just because of Sir Nicholas's recklessness with the facts. Where Sir Nicholas paints an altogether bleak picture, Tol's is far more nuanced: Global warming creates benefits as well as harms, he explains, and in the short term, the benefits are especially pronounced.

More important, Tol is a student of human innovation and adaptation. As a native of the Netherlands, he is intimately familiar with dikes and other low-cost adaptive technologies, and the ability of humans in meeting challenges in their environment. To assume that humans in the future would not use their ingenuity and resourcefulness in sensible ways defies the history of mankind and ultimately serves no one.

Yes, global warming is real, he believes, and yes, measures to mitigate it should be taken. But unlike the advocates who believe that the science is settled, and the global warming debate is over, Tol thinks that much research needs to be done before we know how best to respond.

"There is no risk of damage [from global warming] that would force us to act injudiciously," he explains. "We've got enough time to look for the economically most effective options, rather than dash into 'actionism,' which then becomes very expensive."

THE CV OF A DENIER: Richard Tol received his PhD in Economics from the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. He is Michael Otto Professor of Sustainability and Global Change at Hamburg University, director of the Centre for Marine and Atmospheric Science, principal researcher at the Institute for Environmental Studies at Vrije Universiteit, and Adjunct Professor at the Center for Integrated Study of the Human Dimensions of Global Change, at Carnegie Mellon University. He is a board member of the Centre for Marine and Climate Research, the International Max Planck Research Schools of Earth Systems Modelling and Maritime Affairs, and the European Forum on Integrated Environmental Assessment. He is an editor of Energy Economics, an associate editor of Environmental and Resource Economics, and a member of the editorial board of Environmental Science and Policy and Integrated Assessment.

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