

Why the International Panel on Climate Change has lost credibility
By Michael Thompson

The IPCC: GLACIERGATE, EAST ANGLIAGATE, HOLLANDGATE AND CULTURAL THEORY

Many years ago, Mary Douglas explained that cultural theory is a theory of "selective attention", and it is selective attention (and not conspiracy or fraud, or rather not just conspiracy and fraud) that is at the heart of these trust-sapping surprises that have overtaken the IPCC. So, if there is a theory of selective attention, we should use it, especially since it has already been used over about 20 years now, to explain similar upsets (including some in the Himalayan region, see below, that are extraordinarily similar to those we find in Glaciergate). Such upsets, this theory argues, stem from just one "voice" having become "hegemonic": able, that is, to exclude and, if need be, silence other dissenting or challenging voices. The theory further argues that there are just four voices: the hierarchical (the IPCC's voice), the individualist (the Institute of Economic Affairs' voice, for instance, but also that of many of the outfits that the IPCC has demonised as "denialist" or purveyors of "voodoo science"), the egalitarian (the voice of unco-opted environmentalist movements such as Earth First!, who see the problem as far more serious and pressing than does the IPCC) and the fatalist (James Lovelock, for instance, who, pointing to serious omissions in the IPCC's models, argues that all the talk of limiting climate change to between 2 and 4 degrees is pointless, since the climate is set to increase by at least 4 no matter what we do).

The IPCC should have been designed (and now needs to be re-designed) so that it is what is called a "clumsy institution": a set-up in which each of these 4 voices is (a) able to make itself heard and (b) is then responsive to the others. If social scientists can show self-proclaimed "hard" scientists how to do science properly when they venture into areas characterised by high levels of uncertainty and the potential for intense politicisation then those "hard" scientists, as scientists, should listen.

HimalayaGate

The totally mistaken claims about the rate of deforestation in the Himalaya is uncannily similar to the current upset over the rate at which the Himalayan glaciers are disappearing. Again and again and again it was asserted, often to one or even two decimal points, that the rate at which the burgeoning population in the hills of Nepal were removing the trees that held those steep and unstable slopes together was such that they would soon all be gone. "Ten years to baldness" was the claim, with the World Bank, slightly more cautiously, asserting that "By the turn of the century {at that time, 15 years away} there would be no accessible forests left in Nepal". All these claims, it turned out, could be traced back to just one draft report (for the US Library of Congress). All ignored the 20 or so research projects that had tried to measure the two key rates: per capita fuelwood consumption and the sustainable yield from forest production. These studies, once collated, showed that the estimates of the first variable varied by a factor of 67, and of the second variable

by a factor of 150. Take the two most pessimistic estimates and the Himalaya would indeed be as bald as a coot almost overnight. But take the two most optimistic estimates and those same mountains would shortly sink beneath the greatest accumulation of biomass the world had ever seen. Yet all the key institutions - bilateral aid agencies, the United Nations' various agencies, the World Bank and so on - ignored that uncertainty, choosing instead to zero in on the one certainty that suited the solution they were anxious to deliver: "10 years to baldness".

We dubbed this "validation by repetition", and it is, of course, the antithesis of the scientific method. Those who selected this certainty were then able to go unchallenged because, in the development context that existed in Nepal at that time, they were able to exclude any voices that might have challenged that assertion. Eventually, of course, some other voices were able to force their way in and the debilitating hegemony collapsed.

Fast forward now to 2009/2010 and we find almost exactly the same thing happening with the IPCC and its certainty over the retreat of the Himalayan glaciers as a result of man-made climate change: "all will have disappeared by the year 2035" (2030, in the case of the rather more impatient NASA). And just as with deforestation 30 or so years earlier, we find that all these assertions can be traced back to just one far-from-reliable source: validation by repetition!