



## **Earth in crisis: environmental policy in an international context**

*Scientists, sceptics and deniers*

### **Penny Boreham**

Dave, does the fourth assessment report give this credence to the scientific claims would you say now, is it much more definite, because it is mentioned in the film that perhaps some of the scientific evidence is still uncertain, or people are saying that?

### **Dave Humphries**

The scientific evidence is very clear on the main thesis of global warming; mainly that human-induced emissions of greenhouse gases are driving changes in the mean temperature of the Earth. In fact the conclusions of the fourth assessment report has reached, that was released in 2007, are more clear and more emphatic than any previous report of the inter-governmental panel on climate change. If we go back to the first assessment report it was quite equivocal. It said that maybe the recent changes to the Earth's temperature are due to anthropogenic factors as we call them, human factors, but they also lie well within the parameters of natural variability so there was no firm conclusion. What we've seen in the second, third and now the fourth assessment reports is that the conclusions are growing stronger, that scientists that were previously more sceptical about this main thesis of human-induced climate change are now signing up to it, they accept that the evidence is there. So there's evidence not just of the central thesis of climate change, but also of how its effects will play out in particular areas, such as the conclusions that scientists have reached, there will be stronger and more frequent storms in Southern Bangladesh. However, with respect to the uncertainties there will always be some uncertainties over what the effects will be. OK scientists can't run a controlled experiment on climate change, we've only got one Earth, OK, so by pumping huge amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, we're in effect running an uncontrolled scientific experiment, so there will always be some uncertainty with respect to how precisely the Earth's temperature will warm and over what time period it will warm. But over the main thesis of human-induced climate change there's no longer any uncertainty, apart from amongst a handful of maverick scientists.

### **Penny Boreham**

We heard so passionately people saying it's the West's bounden duty to do something in the film – how much hope really is there of intervention in a big scale to try and put some of these problems in better shape?

### **Dave Humphries**

One of the things that the course shows is that in order for governments to take action there sometimes has to be social demand for action to be taken. It was interesting that in December 2008 the Environment Secretary in the United Kingdom, Ed Miliband, called for popular mobilisation, he called for people to pressure their governments, quite an astonishing thing for a Government Minister to do, to call upon the people to pressure their governments to take certain action, but you can see why he would do this, because the United Kingdom, for all its faults, is very much one of the leaders amongst the developed countries to take a strong line on climate change, but if the United Kingdom goes ahead and it's the first country in the world to have a Climate Change Act, if it goes ahead and does this without action from other countries, such as the big polluters such as China and the United States of America, then ultimately it will count for nothing. It needs co-ordinated action around the world.

### **Penny Boreham**

We had eight years of no action in the Bush administration – do you have any hope for Barack Obama?

**Dave Humphries**

Well we await the outcome of the Obama administration's kind of policies with great interest. The Bush administration, as you say, took no action partly because it was listening to the climate change deniers and particularly those funded by the oil company Exxon Mobil. Now I would like to draw a distinction here between denialists and sceptics. A sceptic is somebody who searches for the truth, but needs scientific evidence to be persuaded that they've found that, OK, they're open-minded and objective; the deniers that have had such a voice in the United States and some other countries, do not seek the truth, they take a political line that climate change is not happening, for whatever reason. Sometimes this is because it's in their economic interests to deny climate change – perhaps they work for the aviation industry, or they work for the oil industry - or perhaps it's just a reluctance to admit that something as grave and potentially catastrophic as this could actually be happening.

**Penny Boreham**

If you could take the whole scientific community, what percentage would you say were deniers?

**Dave Humphries**

I'd say there's very few deniers now in the scientific community – very, very few – probably on a worldwide scale, probably no more than a half a dozen, but of people that are not so conversant with the scientific evidence, people in society at large, there are quite a few. I think if you go on any climate change website, for example The Guardian, you will see that there's quite a few responses from people who quite angrily sometimes deny that this is happening, that it's a hoax, it's a conspiracy. Who the hoax is being perpetrated by, who the conspirators are we're never really told, but we're told that people are telling lies about this. Sadly, it's not the case, I wish it were.