

Mindless

John and Fiona Earle

This article is derived from entries in the Personal Column of the "Shooting Star", and excerpts from articles written by some of the paper's Special Correspondents. It was written before the Bali Conference on Climate Change.

From the Science Correspondent: "The generation of electricity accounts for about a quarter of the total CO₂ emission from the earth. At present, the annual global total of these emissions is a bout 10 billion tons of CO₂ and is set to rise to 12 billion tons by 2010. Putting wind farms all around Britain does no more than nibble at the problem. Within a household in the UK, a single kilowatt-hour of electricity leads to a discharge of 1lb of CO₂ from a power station."

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"Senior Government Official (SGO) would like to meet an established science-fiction writer to assist with the Government's Climate Change Policy. At first a brief sentence or phrase is needed, then something longer to divert attention from climate change whilst suggesting that the Government is taking the necessary steps

SGO does not wish to discriminate between different classes of fiction but our Communications Department feels that close involvement with crime fiction should be limited given recent police enquiries about funding.."

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"The Shooting Star" has recently received a preview of an Inter-Governmental report on Climate Change. (This was also reported in the Scottish Edition of *The Times* on November 12th 2007). The report says there must be deep cuts in carbon emissions but expects there may be political challenge.

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From SGO: "Come on Guys. When you took up writing you WANTED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE. DIDN'T YOU? Come on. Good Pay. Cash. Flexi-time.

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From the Political Correspondent. "The Cabinet expressed deep regret at the narrow, shallow view taken by the Report. They emphasise that they accept that the country has agreed to rationing in times of wartime scarcity. At present, the armed services are at war, but the country as a whole is not. The January Sales demonstrate there is no scarcity"

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SGO writes: "The idea of planting trees to absorb CO₂ is sound. Yet in the context of cutting down forests to provide paper for junk mail, it is not politically sustainable. New ideas please."

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SGO writes "People are leaning on me. The utterly b****y Uttlesford District Council has said that if a new runway is built at Stanstead, then the Aviation Policy conflicts with the Climate Change Policy. Well, really. This is just a normal CPP (Conflict of Political Priorities). They are usually solved by the ministers concerned and the toss of a coin. The loser goes quiet for a few weeks, then the financially better policy goes ahead, regardless. This might overlook one or two points but you need to break eggs to make an omelette."

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Overheard in Gents Loo: "What have omelettes got to do with it?" "Not a lot; baked beans and omelettes are all he eats."

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All Saints Alive

From the Science Correspondent: "People say it has all happened before. In a way, it has. The orbit of the earth around the sun changes from an ellipse (warmer years) to a circle (cooler years) and this takes 100,000 years. Likewise the earth rocks on its axis every 40,000 years, so the northern hemisphere gets more or less solar radiation. The radiation from the sun also varies but it seems to happen over a 12,000 year cycle.

"By contrast, the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere has been monitored from a mountain in Hawaii and this shows a steady rise in CO₂ that is in step with an average rise in global temperature.

"In addition, there are obvious signs of warming that are most obvious in winter. Until about 30 years ago, there was regular lying snow in Hertfordshire. Not so now. In Yorkshire, in the sixties, snow would often last from late December to late March and some roads would be blocked by snow at least once a year. (As John was a country doctor there, this mattered!). This does not happen nowadays.

"As the earth warms, you might expect more evaporation from the seas, more clouds and more rainfall. This would be unlikely to spread out evenly throughout the year but might be more spasmodic, and heavy rainfall can be a factor in flooding.

"Floods can be measured by the number of deaths, the number of people made homeless and the costs of re-building. Using these admittedly rough-and-ready measurements, 23 floods worldwide have been classified as 'catastrophic' in the past 50 years. This works out at an average of about 5 per decade. In fact 17 of the 23 floods have occurred since 1990. Not proof, but a pointer.

"All the greenhouse gasses work in the same way. They permit short-wave radiation from the sun to reach us but prevent long-wave radiation getting out.

"We must not only consider the CO₂ we are emitting by burning fossil fuels but also the

gases that exist. Methane is formed in the flatus of animals but also by the action of micro-organisms acting on carbohydrates under water. As the tundra melts (which it is doing) methane escapes; it is 20-30 times as powerful as CO₂ as a greenhouse gas.

"Oxides of nitrogen are 300 times as powerful as CO₂. The amount in the atmosphere is still minute, but it has increased in recent years. It occurs naturally, due to lightening, but also from exhaust fumes from cars and aircraft. It also probably comes from artificial fertilisers containing nitrogen. It is no longer a matter of 'scientists say' – the measurements and observations have been made and ignored."

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Desperate SGO writes: "I have been given a week to find something to satisfy the electorate. If I fail, it is goodbye to my office with the fitted carpet, the secure phone line, my pension and my obliging secretary. After 20 years."

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Ex-SGO writes: "As I was clearing out the office, I came across a book of poems by Stephen Spender. One of them ends

This is the way the world ends,
Not with a bang but a whimper.

I am available for baby-sitting, dog-walking, gardening, home-decorating in London/Hertford area. You can reach me on dumbblond@hotmail.andhow

Sources

"Carbon emissions, nuclear power and other sources of Power" National Geographic magazine April 2006

"Melting of Glaciers" National Geographic magazine June 2007

"Melting of permafrost" National Geographic magazine December 2007

Evening Classes in Ware 2006

"Floods and the orbit of the earth" Extreme Weather – Readers Digest (As part of a series)