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Mixed Messages About Climate

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, SOMETHING SO UNEXPECTED EMERGES FROM THE Administration in Washington, DC, that it just boggles the mind. On 1 June, I opened the front page of the *New York Times* to see two pictures of President Bush. Under the photo dated 2000, he says this about global warming: “I don’t think we know the solution to global warming yet, and I don’t think we’ve got all the facts . . .” But under the 2007 picture, he is calling for a multinational framework for reducing greenhouse gases. Although my environmental friends will hold their applause, this is sounding like progress.

I turn on National Public Radio—same day, same breakfast—and Steve Inskeep is interviewing Michael Griffin, director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Now, Griffin has been challenged before about morale problems at NASA resulting from the scrapping of various robotic space missions and the fate of Earth-observation programs. So I am astonished to hear Griffin say, in answer to a question about whether NASA has cut anything to make room for the Moon-Mars project, “we have not cut any major priorities.” That may have also stunned Inskeep, who turned quickly to a question about global warming.

Here is Griffin’s verbatim answer: “I am aware that global warming—I am aware that global warming exists. I understand that the bulk of scientific evidence accumulated supports the claim that we’ve had about a 1° centigrade rise in temperature over the last century to within an accuracy of about 20%.” He added: “I have no doubt that global—that a trend of global warming exists. I am not sure that it is fair to say that it is a problem we must wrestle with.”

So the president is telling us that we must lead the G8 nations to set long-term goals for cutting greenhouse gas emissions and is calling on other high-polluting nations to join in the negotiations. Meanwhile, the head of Bush’s science agency responsible for Earth observation from space doubts that it’s a problem we must wrestle with. Recall that for years, this Administration has been trying to muzzle NASA’s Jim Hansen for speaking out on global warming. How strange! Hansen is on message, and his NASA boss is off message!

Soon we are back to climate change, and here is Griffin again: “First of all, I don’t think it’s within the power of human beings to assure that the climate does not change, as millions of years of history have shown. And second of all, I guess I would ask which human beings, where and when, are to be accorded the privilege of deciding that this particular climate we have right here today, right now, is the best climate for all other human beings. I’m—I think that’s a rather arrogant position for people to take.” In the first sentence, I guess he’s saying that because climates have changed in the deep past, we may not have the power to prevent such change. Of course, we don’t know how to engineer a new glacial age or convert one into the Holocene. But it’s plain that by mitigating greenhouse gas emissions we might conserve the comparatively balmy climate that our species has lived in for 10,000 years. The second part asks whether particular groups or individuals would have the right to say that the present climate is best or whether some other one is. Well, we have what we have; letting it heat up by doing business as usual sounds pretty arrogant, too. The answer to “who decides” would appear to be that we all do, presumably through a multilateral framework rather like the one the president is now suggesting.

At least, I hope that’s right. Griffin has already gotten some press about his statements, but most of the coverage has lost the main point, which is about confusion in government. Do look at the transcript (www.npr.org/about/press/2007/053107.griffinaudio.html) in case you think I am confused or making all this up. I had gotten so used to consistency among the main players in this Administration that all this strikes me as beyond belief.

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10.1126/science.1145963

