

Testing the climate consensus

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CONSENSUS has its strengths and weaknesses. In politics it can sometimes be a useful model; in other spheres, not so. Until recently it was not a term we associated with science, where the testing of provable facts takes precedence. The fact, for instance, that Nicolaus Copernicus failed to win a public consensus during his lifetime did not alter the reality of his postulations that the Earth was not at the centre of the universe. Likewise, the Earth was a sphere long before the flat Earth consensus dissipated. In that seminal study on such matters, Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, the point is clarified. An idolising crowd is told they should not follow Brian as the Messiah, but think for themselves. "You're all individuals," Brian tells them. "Yes," the crowd responds in unison. "We are all individuals." Then a lone voice pipes up. "I'm not." In this case, the consensus was wrong; as was the dissenter.

The issue of climate change is a significant political, economic and environmental dilemma confronting our nation and the international community. At its heart is science. While we can engage in complex debates about the variety of mechanisms, technologies and practices that can be employed to deal with the issue, none of it makes perfect sense until we grasp the dimensions of the problem. And this is where science is pre-eminent. Yet, thanks largely to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the debate has been centred not on scientific claim and counter-claim -- or scientific theory and measurable results -- but on what's referred to as the "scientific consensus". This is almost an oxymoron; to at least some extent, the two words don't belong in the same sentence.

This is not to say we should not act on the best available scientific information in an emerging field of cross-discipline science. But it does mean we need to consider other ways of arriving at the best possible conclusions. Judith Curry makes a powerful case in *Inquirer* to drop the consensus approach in favour of open debate about uncertainties and interrelated issues. The media could start by reporting the 15-year pause in global warming. Perhaps the public is mature enough to discuss the full range of possible explanations. Perhaps those associated with the axed climate commission, such as David Karoly and Will Steffen, should give it a go.