

Maurice Newman – You have a taker: Brian Schmidt 15 Jan 2014

In his editorial piece in the Australian on Wednesday, Maurice Newman outlined his reasons why he doubts that anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are contributing to an overall warming of the Earth. He also challenged the readers through a quote from eminent climate scientist Richard Lindzen, “to take bets that the global average temperatures in 20 years will in fact be lower than they are now’, any takers?”

So I fully respect Maurice Newman’s right to express an opinion on any topic he chooses, but despite myself also not being a climate scientist – I do have considerable knowledge of the science at hand - I would be delighted to take him up on his implicit wager that in fact, in 20 years time, the Earth will be warmer than it is today.

I do feel like I am taking advantage of the situation, though. You see, in addition to the hundreds of studies that Mr. Newman doesn’t quote in his piece, I know that Ray Spencer’s satellite data of tropospheric temperatures are consistent with anthropogenic warming, albeit indicating a lower rate of warming than surface temperature measurements. And I know that Richard Lindzen’s models, which are at the low end of the prediction of future temperatures, still indicate sufficient warming that I have a high probability of winning this bet, even if he is right, and everyone else is wrong.

Science is about probabilities – not certainty – and there are still a number of ways that I could lose this bet.

First of all, Mr Newman implicitly equates global warming to surface air temperature. Since more than 90% of the excess heat is being stored in the world’s oceans, it would be scientifically sounder to compare the mean ocean temperature. The air temperature shows far more fluctuations and it is not beyond possibility (although unlikely) that natural fluctuations could cause the temperature for a few years to be cooler than currently.

A huge volcanic eruption, comet impact, or such event could cool the Earth – unlikely, but not without precedent.

Or it could be that despite the intense efforts, the broad scientific evidence is flawed. These are all small risks I am prepared to take.

So Mr. Newman – I am prepared to put \$10000 on the line that the average Earth’s surface air temperature in a 3-year average (2013-2015 compared to 2033-2035) will be warmer 20 years from now.

Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money to me, but since I am about 99% percent sure that the Earth is warming due to anthropogenic causes, it seems a deal too good to pass up. And also, as Maurice Newman correctly points out, science is not about neutrality, it is about calling the science as you see it. Which is exactly what I am doing here today.

One final request. Mr Newman, I also know that you ARE an expert in investment. As part of the bet, it only makes sense to put our money into an account where you can use your skills to maximise the return to the victor, decided on the basis of the data supplied by the Bureau of Meteorology in 2036. I am equally confident about the science and the likelihood that you will achieve a far greater return on our investment than I ever could.

