



A new row about the IPCC

A climate of conflict

The world's climate experts must work harder to avoid conflicts of interest

PANELS of experts assessing scientific investigations tend to be messy affairs, particularly when their customers are governments. People with expertise in one field, such as renewable energy, may have a bias towards it. Summaries of their work are the result of political negotiations. And findings are further boiled down in an attempt to win media coverage.

Much of this can be seen in a new "special report" on renewable energy by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was released last week. Possible conflicts of interest, revealed by Steve McIntyre, a blogger, have led to another controversy about the panel—only 18 months after its embarrassment over an incorrect claim about the imminent demise of the Himalayas' glaciers.

For a start, the press release about the report was misleading. "Close to 80% of the world's energy supply could be met by renewables by mid-century if backed by the right enabling public policies, a new report shows," it claims. In fact, the report merely discusses the assumptions needed to produce this outcome, one of the more extreme scenarios the IPCC looked at.

A poorly written press release might have caused less of a stir, were it not for the fact that Greenpeace had come up with the scenario. Its development was led by Sven Teske, director of the group's renewable-energy campaign. He was also one of the 12 authors of the chapter in question. What is

more, a Greenpeace publication based on this scenario was graced by a foreword written by Rajendra Pachauri, the IPCC's chairman.

As if to underline such problems, when the governments that make up the IPCC met in May to release the summary of the report, they also adopted, for the first time, a policy on conflicts of interest among expert authors. Such a policy had been strongly recommended by an outside panel asked to look into the IPCC last year.

Although Mr Teske's case produced headlines, it is not necessarily the most worrying conflict of interest. Environmentalists are concerned about the number of "pro-dam" people on the team of authors reporting on hydropower. And it is not just the authors that may be conflicted. Each chapter of an IPCC report goes through a review process to ensure that all comments have been addressed satisfactorily. One of the two editors overseeing this process for the chapter on wind energy was Christian Kjaer, the boss of a lobbying group, the European Wind Energy Association. He points out that he did not seek the role of review editor, but was asked when someone else dropped out. Given the procedural nature of the task, he does not think that he had a conflict of interest.

Personal bias can be overcome with large, balanced author teams, but in the case of the report on renewables it is not obvious there was such a balance. The re-

port discusses the downsides of various renewable energies, the challenge of incorporating them into existing infrastructure at scale and the vast if poorly bounded costs of deploying them: \$1.5 trillion to \$7.2 trillion in the 2020s, depending on the scenario. But the summary, in particular, is largely upbeat.

A case in point is the generating capacity of renewables. The report discusses the fact that this is smaller than for other forms of power generation. But the summary glosses over the problem, for instance by not mentioning that, although renewables have accounted for almost half the world's new generating capacity in the past two years, the other half has probably generated a lot more electricity.

This is not all the boffins' fault. Some countries, such as Germany, which nominated Mr Teske, are very keen on renewables—and wanted the summary to reflect this. Brazil has little interest in anything that can be seen as biofuel-bashing.

The lesson of the latest IPCC row is that its authors and organisers must fight harder against groupthink—and speedily implement the new conflict-of-interest policy. It is wrong, as Mr Pachauri seems to think, that the policy should not immediately and fully apply to everyone involved in the panel's current climate assessment. It would be churlish to see no progress on reforming the IPCC, but blindness to believe there had been enough. ■