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Variability in terms is a product of government climate

By **Sharon Beder**

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Professor Kate Auty, the Victorian Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, told *The Age* newspaper recently that public servants in Victoria have been instructed to use the term "climate variability" rather than "climate change". Because the climate is naturally variable, "climate variability" is a more soothing term than "climate change" and therefore less likely to incite calls for government action.

There is a long history to the preference for euphemisms to describe our global crisis. In 2002 Frank Luntz, a pollster and political adviser for the US Republicans, argued that the Bush administration should use the term "climate change" rather than "global warming" for similar reasons.



Illustration: Michael Mucci

In a memo to Republicans, Luntz advised " 'Climate change' is less frightening than 'global warming' ... While 'global warming' has catastrophic connotations attached to it, 'climate change' suggests a more controllable and less emotional challenge."

Luntz also urged Republican politicians to encourage the public to believe there was no consensus on global warming: "The scientific debate is closing [against us] but not yet closed. There is still a window of opportunity to challenge the science ... Therefore, you need to continue to make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate ..."

Until 2002 both "global change" and "climate change" were used but after 2002 climate change began to be used increasingly often in US documents. In fact the use of climate change had begun to take over earlier in other English-speaking nations, no doubt under advisement from think tanks and business advisers.

An even earlier term that gained popular currency in the 1980s was "greenhouse effect". That term had the merit of being educational in that it explained the mechanism for global warming and gave it a physical reality for laypeople. However, there was the problem that there is a natural and benign greenhouse effect that protects the Earth's atmosphere. As a result there was a short-lived effort to change the name to "enhanced greenhouse effect" or "anthropocentric greenhouse effect".

By 1990 "greenhouse effect" began to be replaced by "global warming" and "climate change". A search of the millions of English language books catalogued by Google provides ample demonstration of) the changing preference for the new euphemisms.

The upswing and downturn of the usage of the term "greenhouse effect" seems to coincide with the willingness of the Australian government to act on climate change. In 1988, when the National Greenhouse 88 Conference was held in Australia, there was unprecedented

public interest in the issue. At the time, Australia was acclaimed as one of the most progressive governments on the issue; now it is a greenhouse pariah.

Clearly names do matter and the evolution of names from greenhouse effect to global warming to climate change reflects the continuing battle over the public perception of this phenomenon. This latest iteration into "climate variability" may indeed bury public concern. Is it time to resurrect "greenhouse effect"? Or has the climate crisis grown so acute due to the euphemistic language that we need something to shock people back to reality?

How about "global roasting"?

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