

**Favorite retorts for responding to climate change skeptics and naysayers**  
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**October 2006**

*Note: You are welcome to borrow freely any and all of the ideas here, though where I have quoted others, please attribute the quote properly. Thanks*

(Please see my tips at end of this list for how to deliver these and other responses in the most productive way: the point is to win people over -- not alienate them. Even if the skeptic or naysayer seems clearly "beyond hope," others listening may be thinking the same way but are still reachable, so handle responses with care.)

**Claim:** "We need certainty before we can act. It would not be wise to act prematurely."

**Claim:** "We don't know enough yet: it's too soon to take action on climate change."

**Retorts:**

- The idea of not waiting for full scientific certainty before taking action to avoid serious or irreversible damage is not new – governments do it all the time. Look at how governments make health-related recommendations: they don't require 100% certainty to pull a bad drug off the shelves or warn people about risky health practices!
- Acting without waiting for scientific certainty is something people do frequently: think of the many wise or lucky souls who gave up smoking before the link between smoking and cancer was conclusively established.
- "No one can absolutely know the future. But this does not stop us making forecasts and modifying our behaviour accordingly." (Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers*, page 7). Thus, most ill people will take what their doctor prescribes, even if a cure is not guaranteed.
- It's not absolutely certain that if I salt my food heavily, it will make my blood pressure reach unhealthy levels. In fact, I remember reading, with glee, about a study that questioned the link between salt and hypertension (I love salt). But I chose to cut back on salt anyway. Hedging our bets to protect our well-being is something we all do and it should be no different with trying to prevent climate change.
- As Tim Flannery, author of an excellent new book on climate change, *The Weather Makers*, has said, "if we wait to see if an ailment is indeed fatal, we will do nothing until we are dead."(p. 7).
- William Blake put it best when he said, "You never know what is enough until you know what is *more* than enough."
- The "wait and see" approach on climate change is:
  - A. Not necessary
  - B. Not wise, and
  - C. Not fair to our kids and children of future generations.It's not necessary because there's overwhelming evidence that it's happening already.  
It's not wise because the stakes are so incredibly high.  
It's not fair to our kids – for obvious reasons.

**Claim:** “The science is too uncertain or not conclusive.” (or models, data, are too uncertain, etc.)

**Retorts:**

- Certainly, it’s hard to keep up with all the news on climate change these days, but it is very clear that the jury is no longer out on this issue. The jury came in, the judge sat down and the verdict has been read: the earth has a big problem. *We* have a big problem.
- As stated in *The Economist* in its Sept. 9 (2006) Special Report on climate change: “The uncertainty surrounding climate change argues for action, not inaction.” This is because at this point, the uncertainty is not with whether or not climate change is happening but how much, how fast. When one doesn’t know exactly how much trouble one is in, but only that one is in trouble, that is often sufficient motivation to act.
- Actually, data about what is happening today and in the past is as certain as data gets. What is uncertain is the magnitude and pace of future impacts. But looking at what is known – that climate change is happening now – and considering that many of the options for reigning in greenhouse gases are viable and cost-effective, the path seems pretty clear.
- Sure, there’s always a chance that hundreds of scientists may have gotten it wrong, but as someone\* once observed, while there may be possibility – however improbable – that apples might start to rise instead of fall, “the possibility doesn’t merit equal time in physics classrooms.” (\*Stephen Jay Gould, a famous biologist and science historian)
- We know enough to know that the *status quo* has to go. As Ronald Reagan once said, “*Status quo*, you know, that is Latin for ‘the mess we are in.’ ” Now, he wasn’t saying this in relation to climate change, but his words describe our current situation perfectly.
- It’s not the job of science to create certainty: it’s the job of science to uncover facts. Then, it’s the job of people to look at the facts and make decisions. That’s exactly what climate scientists are now asking people to do.
- When one admits that nothing is certain one must, I think, also admit that *some* things are much more nearly certain than *others*.” (British philosopher and writer, Bertrand Russell)
- “Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.” (Voltaire)

**Claim:** If the true impact of climate change on the planet cannot yet be known, is it really worth spending money now to avoid an uncertain and distant risk?

**Retorts:**

- “If the risk is big enough, yes. Governments do it all the time. They spend a small slice of tax revenue on keeping standing armies not because they think their countries are in imminent danger of invasion but because, if it happened, the consequences would be catastrophic.” (*The Economist*, Special Report on climate change, Sept. 9 2006.)

- Professor Sir Nicolas Stern, former World Bank chief economist and current advisor to the U.K government on the economics of climate change, stated recently that governments act with prudence in policy areas such as defence and financial stability, and that acting prudently “warrants more public action to mitigate climate change, not less.” (World Economics, Vol. 7, No.2, April-June 2006, p. 155).
- Governments plan for distant risks all the time. Think about terrorism and precautions now taken at airports. An Oxford University economist, Cameron Hepburn has stated that “If governments should ever be risk-averse, it’s in the face of this sort of [statistical] distribution. You can think about the risks as similar to those from terrorism.” (as quoted in *The Economist*, Sept. 9, 2006).
- Individuals do this frequently. “They spend a little of their incomes on household insurance not because they think their homes are likely to be torched next week but because, if it happened, the result would be disastrous. Similarly, a growing body of scientific evidence suggests that the risk of a climatic catastrophe is high enough for the world to spend a small proportion of its income trying to prevent one from happening.” (*The Economist*, Special Report on climate change, Sept. 9 2006.)
- “When it comes to more mundane matters, uncertainty hardly deters us: we spend large sums on our children’s education with no guarantee of a good outcome, and we buy shares with no promise of a return. Excepting death and taxes, certainty simply does not exist in our world and yet we often manage our lives in the most efficient manner.” (Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers*, page 7-8).
- “We need to think about climate change maybe as individuals think about insuring their houses.” (Emma Duncan, Deputy Editor of *The Economist* and author of the magazine’s Special Report on climate change, Sept. 9 2006.)

**Claim:** “Why bother making sacrifices in the face of uncertain risk?”

**Retorts:**

- The funny thing is, many of the changes people need to make are either small, or will bring positive personal benefits. For example, if people drive less, they will walk more, which has proven health benefits. Use less electricity and your wallet is fatter.
- As Business Week mentioned back in 2004, “taking action brings a host of ancillary benefits. Making cars and factories more energy-efficient and using alternative sources would make America less dependent on the Persian Gulf and sources of other imported oil. It would mean less pollution. And many companies that have cut emissions have discovered, often to their surprise, that it saves money and spurs development of innovative technologies.” (BusinessWeek Online, August 16, 2004, cover story).
- Sacrifices must be put into perspective. Is putting on a sweater rather than hiking up the heat really such a big sacrifice when it comes to planetary health? Dealing with the aftermath of extreme weather events, moving inland to avoid rising sea levels, radical dietary changes when common crops falter -- *these* are big sacrifices.

- John F. Kennedy once said, “There are risks and costs to a program of action. But they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of comfortable inaction.”
- As Charles Kettering, the famous American inventor and social philosopher who held over 300 U.S. patents, said, “The world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress.”

**Claim:** “The precautionary principle is an unreasonable idea, fashioned by idealists in the environmental movement.”

*[Note: The precautionary principle, made popular by the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1993, Article 15) recognizes that a lack of full scientific certainty should not be used to justify postponing cost-effective measures in the face of threat of serious or irreversible harm.]*

**Retorts:**

- The precautionary principle is not at all a new idea. On the contrary, it is an idea well-entrenched in society. Remember “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”? “Better safe than sorry”? It’s all about being cautious. It’s just common sense and people have been living by it for centuries.
- Governments apply the precautionary principle quite frequently. As a 2001 report from Environment Canada, Canada’s federal government department in charge of environmental matters, states: “Canada has a long-standing history of implementing the precautionary approach in science-based programs of health and safety, environmental protection and natural resources conservation.” (*A Canadian Perspective on the Precautionary Approach/Principle*, September 2001, Environment Canada).
- The precautionary principle is a fundamental element of certain public policies, such as requiring pharmaceutical companies to carry out clinical trials to show that new medications are safe, as well as effective. (Source: Wikipedia)
- The precautionary principle has proved very helpful since early times. In 1854, a British physician named John Snow removed a pump water handle in Broad Street, London, in order to prevent a cholera outbreak from the infected well, even though at the time, the science on the spread of cholera through contaminated water was not yet conclusive. And in 1778, the German Duke of Wuerttemberg and Teck banned the use of lead pipes for drinking water, 200 years before the scientifically grounded World Health Organization guidelines on the toxicity of lead. (Source: Wikipedia – needs verification).

**Claim:** “Even if we start reducing greenhouse gases now, it’s too late. The damage is done.”

**Retorts:**

- As Canadian hockey star Wayne Gretzky (nicknamed “the Great One”) once said, “You miss 100% of the shots you never take.”

- While by many accounts things look bleak, no one is predicting certain catastrophe and in fact many making the direst predictions suggest that it is still possible to keep things from spinning out of control. The prudent course of action speaks loudly for itself.
- There are obviously big ethical issues here. It would be an unpardonable shame not to try and forestall future climate problems when you consider that enough action by enough people right now might make the critical difference. Everybody is in favor of protecting children from this harm or that harm -- but what about climate change? More and more people are realizing it's worth taking action now to ensure that our kids and their kids don't live in a world where climate concerns consume the space where their dreams and aspirations should be.
- Ah, but the uncertainty door swings both ways! Opponents of climate change often argue that since it is not certain that we are heading for calamity, we don't need to act. But the prudent approach would be to say that it is precisely *because* we are not sure whether we are doomed or not and how soon that the time to act is now. If we were absolutely sure there was nothing to be done, then it would make no sense to act. But this isn't the case.
- It's interesting that some who question the validity of climate change say it's too early to do anything while others say it's too late. The reality is, we are here *now*, looking at the science *now*, and it points overwhelmingly in one direction: *now* is the time to act. It's not just environmentalists saying these words, it's leaders of countries and states (e.g. Tony Blair, Arnold Schwarzenegger), and we need to listen.
- As famous American opera singer Beverly Sills once said, "You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try."

**Claim:** "Implementing measures to reduce greenhouse gases will hurt our economy/ jobs."

**Retorts:**

- Well, as a famous French writer once said, "Self-interest makes some people blind, and others sharp-sighted"\* and the sharp-sighted companies and entrepreneurs of the world are seeing economic opportunities in the world of environmentally-friendly practices and products. Those who stubbornly remain blind to the realities of climate change will be left behind. (\*François, Duc De La Rochefoucauld, 1613–1680)
- As Business Week reported back in 2004, companies that do such things as pioneer low-emission cars or find cheap ways to slash emissions will take over from those that can't move that fast. It's probably better to stop complaining and start creating since the latter is more likely to help the bottom line.
- Doing nothing may be a much more costly, as two of the most powerful players in the world economy, the global insurance and banking industries, have recognized. Leaders of these two domains are now coming to believe that *their* self-interest is incompatible with humanity continuing to pump billions of tons of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere every year. (from "Unlikely Eco-Warriors", by Mark Hertsgaard).

**Claim:** “Regulatory measures to cut-back greenhouse gases will too difficult or too costly to implement.”

**Retorts:**

- That’s not the way some CEOs in the energy industry see it. Back in 2004, the CEO of Xcel Energy Inc. said: “Give us a date, tell us how much we need to cut, give us the flexibility to meet the goals, and we’ll get it done.” (BusinessWeek Online, August 16, 2004, cover story).
- Experience seems to suggest the opposite. Look at California. With some of the toughest environmental regulations in North America, it still has a very powerful economy, one of the largest in the world, in fact,\* and this despite extremely high energy prices compared to other states. (\*According to CIA’s *World Factbook*, if California were an independent nation, it would have had the tenth largest economy in the world based on 2005 estimates)
- Last spring (2006), six of eight huge American energy companies, including Exelon, Shell and Duke Energy, said in statements before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee that they would accept mandatory caps on their greenhouse gas emissions.\* If they are saying it is do-able, let’s let them do it! (\* *The Economist*, Special Report on climate change, Sept. 9 2006.)
- Industries faced with new regulations always find a way to adapt, and typically at costs vastly below what they claim at the outset.\* With climate change, many companies have dispensed with crying wolf and are just getting on with the business of finding ways to control greenhouse gases.

**Claim:** “Climate change is a big hoax. It’s the invention of environmentalists looking to line their pockets.”

**Retorts:**

- The “hoax” idea is itself, a myth invented by people who stand to profit handsomely from that position. The really big myth is that environmental groups have money! The vast majority of environmentalists and others concerned about climate change are NOT getting rich or popular by taking this view. By and large, they are unpaid concerned citizens, who pay for things like copies and phone calls out of their own pockets.
- Saying these kinds of claims out loud doesn’t make them true. These days, the “hoax” idea is an old, outdated and roundly criticized myth that even most oil company executives wouldn’t dare say aloud. It’s no longer something that anyone who wants to be taken seriously can say.
- You know, the opponents of climate change used to be able to sway some people with that kind of claim. But today, people have access to photos and film clips of dramatic changes are happening in different parts of the planet as a result of climate change. Look at the pictures. Look at them carefully. In the words of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Things seen are mightier than things heard.”

**Claim:** “How can you make these pronouncements and predictions without being an expert? What are your scientific credentials? What’s your academic background?”

**Retorts:**

- Let’s not confuse the credibility of the communicator with the credibility of the message. Most newspaper articles are not written by experts, but rather by reporters, many of whom have interviewed and are quoting experts. We don’t condemn the reporters for not being experts. We read what they have to say – and often act on the information – when we think the experts referred to are credible. You are entirely welcome and in fact encouraged to consult the work of the experts whose work I refer to.
- What I am doing is conveying information from experts who are too busy studying the problem to make public speeches. And I tell you, they are very, *very* busy. In this environmentally-challenged world, we need everyone doing what they do best. They do the science, and people like me communicate that information.
- To claim that only scientists should speak about climate change is like saying that only economists should talk about money. Climate change is so fundamental that it can affect everyone. Experts, laypersons, *everybody* should be talking about this issue.
- I’m not a scientist, I am a communicator. And like so many communicators, I am not the creator of the information I am conveying. So the real question is, am I a credible communicator? Yes, I have a great deal of experience in giving presentations, but I don’t want to add to the hot air and bore everyone here with my C.V.
- “The public do not know enough to be experts, yet know enough to decide between them.” (19<sup>th</sup> century British novelist, Samuel Butler)

**Strategies for delivering these or other retorts to naysayers and skeptics**

- Say it with humor or a smile: this is far and away the best way to avoid alienating people.
- Avoid a moralistic tone. Few people will warm up to ideas delivered this way. (People on high horses tend to fall off eventually....)
- Refrain from using a sarcastic tone (despite how tempting and satisfying it might otherwise be in certain circumstances...).
- Respond and move on: do not give your naysayer more airtime. Make your retort and return immediately to your next point.
- Avoid the temptation to just blurt out that the world is going to hell in a handbasket. Faced with too much doom, many people will “turn off” your message and contemplate more pleasant things. Even worse, some will take the attitude that, “Well, may as well enjoy the ride while we can.” *It’s critical to convey hope in order to prompt people to act.*