

Sense and nonsense of climate change

By Carlo Steenbergen

Wednesday evening the 25th of February 2009 experts and enthusiastic students gathered together in the debating room of LA13 for a debate about the sense and nonsense of the climate change. Nashiru Sulemana, a MAK student from Ghana, facilitated the lectures and debate of respectively Gerrit Hiemstra, weather forecaster of KNMI, Hans Labohm, a well known climate criticaster from Institute Clingendael, and Rik Leemans, Professor Earth System Science.

Gerrit Hiemstra started with a basic but complete overview of what kind of system the climate actually is. Many anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic factors make up a complicated balance with as result the climate. To note, CO₂ and other greenhouse gasses are only one of the factors, none the less important ones. And as he stressed, climate is something different than weather, which is local and temporarily. He ended with a remark about the definition of science, which is defined in a positivistic way. In science a theory is proven and therefore true. Science is also something different than comparing graphs, the favourite hobby of Al Gore.

The second speaker was Hans Labohm, a humoristic speaker, who chose the position of the underdog, according to the writer of this article. As CO₂ is most discussed in the media concerning climate change, he initially chooses to focus upon that aspect, acknowledging that there were more factors of importance. He used many graphs to show that the CO₂ follows the change in temperature, and not the other way around. The choice of mr. Labohm to focus upon CO₂ in his presentation caused some confusion later on as mr. Leeman accused him of narrowing down the problem to only that specific gas.

Further he argued that the last 8 years the global temperature is actually decreasing, which was not forecasted by one of the models of IPCC. Besides this he mentioned other factors influencing the climate, and not taken into account by the IPCC, as the Dalton minimum, a periodic decrease in temperature every few decades, and the influence of a solar radiation cycle. Although mr. Labohm had some articles published, he and his fellow sceptics were not backup with that many 'proven' science as mr. Leemans.

The last lecturer was Rik Leemans, who chose to focus upon the communication about climate change. With this he tried to argue that the IPCC was so well organised, back-upped with so many peer-reviewed articles and as it has included the criticasters in the process, the result is a proof of the anthropogenic influence on climate change. However the fuzz is caused by scientists themselves which job is to be critical to each other, creating different messages to policymakers. His final message was that the goal should not be to stabilize the climate, but to mitigate the anthropogenic influence and if not possible anymore, to adapt to the changes. However the climate system itself cannot cope with it anymore.

The following debate was dominated by mr. Labohm and mr. Leemans and the arguments got a bit personal sometimes. It was interesting to see that both could explain the fluctuation of the temperature over the last 6 decades in a totally different way, using totally different arguments.

Hans Labohm ended with the remark that not a global heating is to be expected but a cooling. This is actually more harmful than a warming, as societies flourish in a warmer climate. The counterargument by mr. Leemans was that this was based on the GDP, in which the western countries have the biggest share by far.

Most of the people left the building with more questions than answers, so in that sense we can say the evening was successful. Arguments and counterarguments were shared and the public was able to raise questions. Amongst others, questions like: 'Is it possible to completely neutralize the anthropogenic influence? Is it possible to correctly model all the factors and their feedback loops? Which part of climate change is 'proven'?' remained. One thing which became clear is that both sceptics and non-sceptics can perfectly use figures, data and graphics to prove their theory to the general audience. The coming decades will show who was right, so for the final ordeal we will need some patience.