

## **Room for climate debate: perspectives on the interaction between climate politics, science and the media**

Jeroen P. van der Sluijs, Rinie van Est and Monique Riphagen (eds)

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### **Report to Dutch Parliament**

#### **English summary**

The present study offers a picture of the complex interaction between climate politics, science and the media.

During the 1970s and 1980s, politics and the sciences focused increasingly on the climate problem, at the time known as the greenhouse effect. Due to a lack of sufficient scientific evidence and absence of international policies, the Netherlands pursued a 'no regrets' climate policy. Measures such as energy savings, which were already justified in other policy domains, were sharpened. This all changed in the period between 1987 and 1994. Since then, the precautionary principle and the scientific consensus approach of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have determined how the political arena deals with scientific uncertainties in the field of climate change.

The precautionary principle entails that in order to intervene to limit an environmental risk no full scientific knowledge of that risk is needed – clear scientific indications suffice. To create a clear scientific knowledge base for the development and legitimation of an international climate policy, the UN established the IPCC in 1988. This made political actions at an international level dependent on the scientific consensus within the IPCC. The first IPCC report from 1990 indicated that it is likely that continued emissions of anthropogenic greenhouse gases would lead to global warming. On the basis of this knowledge the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was signed in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The second (1995), third (2001) and fourth (2007) IPCC reports showed a growing scientific evidence: instead of 'likely', the IPCC now considers 'very likely' that not intervening will cause 'threats of serious or irreversible damage'.

The interaction model between politics and science that was set up in domestic and international political arenas to deal with scientific uncertainties is also known as the linear or technocratic model. Its underlying assumption is that more scientific research will lead to more reliable knowledge and less uncertainty, and that that knowledge will then form a basis for political consensus and decision-making. One could say that, for the Netherlands, the linear model has worked for a long time, in the sense that it has provided a long-term and broad political consensus about climate policy.

This approach has hindered a full-blown political climate debate and has politicised climate science. Analysis of parliamentary debates over the last twenty years show that IPCC reports are continuously used to keep the political debate within bounds. Questions are repeatedly asked in the Dutch Parliament about scientific information and scientific uncertainties surrounding the climate issue. These questions come from the entire political spectrum. The government consistently answers that scientific uncertainties

do exist, but that policies are based on the IPCC reports and the precautionary principle. Because the political arena has given the IPCC reports such a central role, the political conflict about climate change and the underlying ideological contradictions have penetrated deep into the field of climate science. In other words, political influence nowadays can be achieved most effectively via climate science. With the IPCC reports in hand, proponents of the climate debate claim a preferential position in the debate. Opponents try to reopen the political debate by magnifying uncertainties and imperfections in climate science.

In the post-Climategate discussion and the unearthing of faults in the fourth IPCC report the linear model has been harshly attacked, yet also strongly defended and upheld. Especially the PVV (Party for Freedom) dismissed the IPCC as an activity driven by left-wing politics. The government side defended the linear model. To clean up the blemished blazon of the IPCC – that is, to restore the linear interaction model between climate politics and science – national and international political bodies ordered an independent evaluation of its procedures and practices.

Given the intense criticism, repairing the technocratic model by evaluating the IPCC is a logical and good step to take. A good picture of the status of climate science is in fact an important precondition for prudent domestic and international climate policies. Still, more is needed. The basic weakness of the linear model is that it underexposes the scientific as well as the political dissent. Both the scientific and the political climate debate need more space and attention for diversity and uncertainty in knowledge and views. To this end, it is necessary to make climate science less political. This can be accomplished by offering room for dissent within climate science and communicating about it with policymakers. An excessive dependence of science and policy should also be prevented. The political climate debate would benefit from clarification of the political values and visions that are at play in climate change. The climate debate could be expanded by paying attention to socially attractive development perspectives rather than doomsday scenarios only. The growing focus on climate adaptation also has the power to highlight and expand the political climate debate.

#### **Climate change in the media**

The written and edited press gives the Dutch public comprehensive and balanced information about climate change and the societal and political debate surrounding it. The Dutch media pay attention to the political and scientific debates. News coverage about climate science can be called nuanced. The attention for the political process focuses mainly on the international debate that unfolds primarily around the UN climate summits. News coverage about the Dutch political debate on climate change remains far behind.

*Note: a full English translation of the report will be available by June 2010  
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