

THE Y2K PROBLEM

Unfortunately, many of us believe that if a substantial number of people (generally described as ‘everyone’) believe something is right, then it must be right. I have already talked of the failures of previous Green campaigns when ‘everyone’ believed the Greens were right, only to find later that they were so wrong it was unbelievable. A more recent non–Green example might reinforce the point that we should not automatically assume that a “consensus of ‘everyone’”, makes something right.

In the mid-1990s, the IT industry elevated a concern that many existing computer programs that did not recognise dates after 31st December 1999 might misbehave on New Year’s Eve 1999. This ‘mouse’ of a problem was quickly turned into a ‘wolf’, then a ‘large bear’, and finally into ‘digital Armageddon’. The Media, and initially the IT industry, convinced those who did not understand computers, that a global response was necessary to prevent this problem. Very quickly, reality was lost and a ‘fear and emotion’ campaign had the citizens demanding action from the politicians even if such action made little sense. The IT industry became mute as millions of dollars were poured into this problem, and IT recruitment surged. The Media, of course, had a vested interest in keeping the fear campaign going. Some people in America were so fearful they spent New Year’s Eve in their backyard bomb shelters believing that the computers would start World War Three.

New Year’s Eve came and went, and nothing happened. The snake oil salesmen told us how all this money was well spent, as it had prevented ‘digital Armageddon’. Most of us realised we had been conned. In Australia alone, hundreds of millions of dollars had been misspent¹, and funding priorities had been corrupted just because ‘everyone’ believed it was right after being convinced by a ‘fear and emotion’ campaign. Did we learn from this? No! Was there an inquiry into the misspent public funds? No! Yet at other times, we have inquiries into politicians misusing trivial amounts of public funds on postal allowances etc.

I am not convinced that global warming is a major problem just because ‘everyone’ agrees. The Green’s massive fear and emotion campaign has ensured this result, while reality might have been lost.

Notes:

1. “Governments duly prepared for disaster with the BBC reporting that global preparations for the millennium bug were estimated to have cost more than \$US300 billion. All for nought. Nothing happened. It was, as James Taranto wrote in The Wall Street Journal, “the hoax of the century”.

Maurice Newman, who was chairman of the Australian federal government's Y2K committee, told The Australian last week that "in pressing the urgency for compliance, the committee members relied heavily on **confirmatory bias**. Most of this came from **so-called experts** who had much to gain from creating a sense of alarm. The consequence of widespread inaction was claimed to result in chaos and systemic failure. As there was no alternative authoritative voice, this became **perceived wisdom** and was certainly believed by the committee. As such the Y2K phenomenon took on a life of its own." (Source: Opinion, The Australian, 4th November, 2009)