

On conservatism

A “conservative” is one who resists change. Such people distrust new ideas, customs, or technology. They say new-fangled notions are undesirable, unnecessary, and may even be morally reprehensible. Conservatives come in many colours: religious traditionalists can be very forward-looking on some technological progress; political conservatives can be very modern in their attitude to gender roles.

Where would you go to find a conservative? You’d look in the regions, rather than the big cities, and you’d look in the rural sector. In the countryside, there is greater respect for age, and with age comes conservatism. The elders have seen many seasons, including unusual ones, and will caution against rash actions that have caused problems in the past. “Tried and true” has always been one recipe for survival. Forestry has a particularly long growing cycle and has only recently become a science. It is natural that tree-people are conservative folks.

I hasten to add that there is nothing wrong with conservatism. Society needs change-resistors as well as change makers, just as a car needs brakes as well as an accelerator. Individuals can’t be expected to be both types - a judicious mixture is required for a stable but progressive community. Problems arise if one faction or other gains too strong a hand for a prolonged period. Some loony developments occur if radicals take over power - like the attempt to ban money in Pol Pot’s Cambodia in 1975, or to abolish the mother-child bond in some 1960’s Israeli kibbutzim. Yet if conservatives dominate, social and technological development can fossilise - as we have seen in the Islamic world that gave us the word algebra, or in Chinese civilisation that developed the first printing techniques back in the second century AD.

One could argue that a healthy mixture of both attitudes has facilitated the rapid achievements of Science in the twentieth century: radical ideas vigorously tested by sceptics. Without the former, the great intuitive leaps would not have happened. Without the latter, we could still be wasting research effort on unicorns, not to mention UFOs, telepathy or cold fusion.

In turbulent times conservatives can lend a steadying hand, like a sea anchor in rough waters. Occasionally though, it is important to make headway and the drag must be cut loose. I am thinking, of course, about the need for rapid response to climate change.

Some concepts challenge our world-view fundamentally, and are hotly opposed by conservatives. Historically, major conceptual changes have taken a long time to become the “conventional wisdom”. The usual approach is to allow the diehards to die off, so that a more open-minded offspring can off-load their ideas.

Eratosthenes knew that the world was spherical in the third century B.C. and used this knowledge to measure its circumference with an error of just a few percent. It took 17 centuries for this idea to become widely accepted by

the educated few, and for Magellan to circumnavigate the Earth. In 1543, Copernicus proposed that the sun was the centre of our solar system, later to be supported by Galileo and opposed by the Catholic Church. In 1992 the Pope acknowledged the mistake. It took only five centuries this time. The pace of change is speeding up.

When Wegener, in 1912, devised the theory of plate tectonics (one of the cornerstones of modern geology or plant evolution), he received a hostile reception by fellow scientists. It took only 50 years to rehabilitate him.

Unfortunately, with global warming, such delay could be disastrous. Irreversible changes are expected to occur well within the lifespan of some of the readers of this column - we do not have the luxury of waiting for sceptics to die. Some conservatives find it totally unacceptable that Nature is not all-coping, all-forgiving and all-loving, like some idealised mother. They invent reasons for not concurring with the bulk of mainstream scientists. “The climate has always changed”. Sure it has, but although validation of human-induced global warming is only starting to appear, Nobel-prize-winner Arrhenius first proposed the theory over 100 years ago from a knowledge of the properties of different gases. The huge temperature rises (for example, a 12 degree increase in the Arctic North) can no longer be explained by natural background fluctuations, most of which are now well understood.

The good news is that the acceptance of manmade global warming has been amazingly fast - from a specialist minority in the science community of the 1970’s to the current general consensus. The evidence from numerous unrelated fields of science all pointed in the same direction, but nevertheless the rapid transformation in thinking is truly remarkable.

When the WHO advocated the elimination of smallpox through a worldwide vaccination campaign, they were opposed by a number of scientists - some of whom had quite good credentials. Vaccinations were dangerous and ineffective, they said. Others argued that the smallpox virus was continually seeded from outer space, so permanent elimination was impossible. Fortunately, these doubters were brushed aside and we live in a smallpox-free world. So the twentieth century has provided at least one enduring benefit for which our descendants can be eternally grateful.

Similarly, it is time to ignore the greenhouse sceptics. Like the Flat-Earthers, their views may disappear when they die. In the meantime, we have important work to do. And foresters, despite our conservative backgrounds, have more work to do than most. Let’s get on with it.

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