

MARGARET WENTE

The climate talks: 'We want to feel good about ourselves'

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Justin Trudeau has taken Paris by storm. Our handsome young leader has polished up Canada's green image and won us international respect – all without committing us to much of anything at all. Which is exactly what this mammoth climate gabfest is about: good intentions, high-flown rhetoric, and zero substance.

Even Catherine McKenna, our gung-ho new Environment Minister, can't disguise this embarrassing fact. "To be clear," she told reporters on the weekend, "this agreement does have to be legally binding but there may be aspects of it that won't be legally binding." For example, nobody's emissions targets will be legally binding. It's like pledging to pay down your mortgage, so long as nothing bad will happen if you don't. And even if everybody delivers, the effect on global temperatures will be barely measurable.

All of this is fine with Michael Hart. "I would like these people to feel they've had a triumph, so they won't bother us again," he told me on the weekend.

Mr. Hart, a veteran trade negotiator, is professor emeritus at Carleton University, where he held the Simon Reisman chair in trade policy at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs. For the past few years he's taught a seminar on the science, economics and policy of climate change. (He got a scientist to teach the science part.) Most of his students began the course as true believers – and most of them, he says, changed their minds.

Mr. Hart believes that climate change is a rabbit hole that runs wide and deep. The complex science of climate change, he argues in his new book, *Hubris*, has been politicized and distorted by movement advocates who are deeply invested in altering public policy in often harmful ways. "Multiple interests have become dependent on these policies and will fight to maintain them, including thousands of officials whose careers are wedded to them," he writes. "As so often happens in public policy, unintended and harmful consequences become accepted practice, despite their costs and annoyance."

Mr. Hart has written a shelf full of sober, sensible books on trade policy. But he couldn't get a publisher for *Hubris*. He wasn't surprised. "Most people in academia don't like what I'm writing on climate change," he says. So he published it himself. (You can order it on Amazon.) It is aimed at the broad, agnostic middle – people who care about the issue but aren't certain that we're doomed if we don't take drastic action now. In other words, it's a great antidote to Naomi Klein, not that her fans are likely to care.

"Governments are playing this game as a largely political issue rather than a real issue," Mr. Hart maintains, "Most government leaders know there's a lot of nonsense in it."

The Trudeau generation is different, though. "This is something they've been taught in school. They believe in this stuff without ever understanding it." What frustrates him is that academics, social scientists and bureaucrats take the alarmist predictions as a given. And they are anything but a given. "All you have to do is read the abstract and the conclusions of these studies to see all the caveats that are built in. The conclusions are nowhere near as strong as those presented to the general public."

Wait a minute. Don't 97 per cent of scientists agree about climate change? "Sheer nonsense," he scoffs. "But one hundred per cent agree that this is a very potent source of government funding."

Mr. Hart, who has spent years interacting with politicians and senior business leaders, says that skepticism about the perils of global warming is relatively widespread in the business and political world. But no politician or captain of industry can say so publicly without ruinous damage to his image and that of the party or business he represents. So they keep quiet. Even the oil patch barons know their best strategy is to get on the bus. That's the best way to help shape policy and minimize the harm.

The good news, he notes, is that the public is quite sensible about climate change. When people are asked to rank climate against other issues, it's often near the bottom. "We want to be perceived as helpful and virtuous," he says. "We want to feel good about ourselves – so long as we don't harm ourselves."



What climate change? Fun and games in Beijing