



Emerson Street Napier

My Hometown, My friends and family and the politicisation of Cyclone Gabrielle

Poor old Maureen Pugh MP.

Fool enough to ask for "evidence" of climate change just as a "once in a generation" weather event strikes. Her leader, clearly taken by surprise, brushed her confusion aside, citing there is no room in the National (tory) party for "climate deniers or climate minimalists."

When was asking the Climate Change Minister for evidence of climate change a sin?

I was born and bred in Napier - Church Road, Taradale, to be precise. They say you can take the boy out of Napier but you can't take the Napier out of the boy. That's true. I left on a cheery November day in 1994, off on my Big OE. But I've never stopped being a kid from Hawke's Bay. My brother is still there as are old friends going way back to kindergarten days through to my rugby mates at Napier Tech. At least three bridges I used regularly are gone. The Esk Valley, where the annual Parish Picnic would be held, is beyond recognition. One mate was airlifted from Rissington

I am angry that our pollies chose this week to make grand statements on climate change and for the media to pander, even salivate, at the opportunity my desperate hometown provided. Hit by the climate clobbering machine, Maureen Pugh duly delivered her *mea culpa* to assuage a press baying for her blood. Not to mention her colleagues, ironically, members of a party that prides itself on evidence based decision making.

Anthropogenic climate change is real but after 150 years of climate change, how much is the climate being affected? Let's do something not one journalist or politician has done - check some publicly available expert sources.

Firstly, climate scientists measure climate changes over a minimum of 30 years - not the last 10 years, or last weekend. This is because of natural weather oscillations caused by longer-term weather and oceanic patterns. For example the Interdecadal Pacific Oscillation (google it) cools or warms the planet on a 20 - 30 year cycle. The El Nino/La Nina weather oscillation has a huge impact on annual climate and sea level here in NZ - La Nina conditions are currently prevailing for the third year in succession (very unusual). To quote NIWA, La Nina brings "moist, rainy conditions to northeastern areas of the North Island and reduced rainfall to the lower and western South Island."

Aint that the truth.

Whilst, as one scientist^[1] has said, it may be a sign of things to come, for now tropical cyclone Gabrielle is a nasty "weather" event that is consistent with predictions, not "climate change."

Any journalist can look to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) latest Sixth Assessment Report. But it doesn't tell the dramatic story they want. It is quite equivocal on changes to tropical cyclones, like Gabrielle. The influential Summary for Policy Makers^[2] says: "*There is low confidence in long-term (multi-decadal to centennial) trends in the frequency of all-category tropical cyclones... data limitations inhibit clear detection of past trends on the global scale.*"

"Data-limitations" is code for "no evidence."

Later they address changes to heavy precipitation in New Zealand saying there is *low confidence* due to a lack of agreement on the evidence of trends. They go on to note: *"In New Zealand between 1960 and 2019 in both summer and winter, rainfall increased in some stations in the South Island and decreased at many stations in the North Island, however most station trends are not statistically significant."*[\[3\]](#)

"Lack of agreement"? "not statistically significant"? Both are code for no evidence.

James Shaw will have a tough job showing evidence of climate change relying on the IPCC analysis of tropical cyclones. He was on the news saying "denying climate change is denying science. You should ask her [Pugh] if she believes in reality and or gravity."

This glib dismissal would be laughable if it weren't my hometown's future at stake. Climate changes are much more subtle than an apple falling off a tree. The quantum physics involved are well understood but the mix of land-use and changes, green house emissions, oceanic exchanges, natural variability and the short data sets, make climate change a far more challenging branch of science than Newtonian theory (which incidentally, was corrected hundreds of years later by Einstein).

What about NIWA, the taxpayer funded weather and atmosphere experts? I noted their advice on what to expect from La Nina conditions above and they were right on the money. Their Southwest Pacific Tropical Cyclone Outlook[\[4\]](#) is a collaboration with the MetService. It was issued last October predicting that 6 to 10 named cyclones could occur. The report described an expected "near normal" season based on the average since 1969. My interpretation of that is that they saw no evidence of a changing climate that would put the expected weather outside what has been normal since 1969. Nevertheless, they cautioned that New Zealand should remain "vigilant" due to the possibility of at least one ex-tropical cyclone passing within 550 km of the country.

What about other climate indicators? Stats NZ's most recent update on various climate indicators shows a mixed bag but no clear trend across the country. Windiness was up and down depending on which location. [\[5\]](#) Maximum rainfall in a single day decreased at 10 sites and increased at 9 with no change at the remaining 11.[\[6\]](#) Very high and extreme fire danger days likely increased at 12 and decreased at 8, of 28 sites across New Zealand, with no trend at 8.[\[7\]](#) Warm days likely increased at 24, and frost days decreased at 18 of 30 sites across New Zealand.[\[8\]](#) So swings, roundabouts and a lot of no changes.

The above is a small sample of climate indicators, mainly here in New Zealand and I am sure to be criticised for being selective or 'cherry picking' as they call it - I welcome comments. Other parts of the world may be seeing more acute changes, feel free to post these changes in the comments with credible references.

But a little-known fact is that New Zealand's weather is so variable, the IPCC's^[9] prior report on New Zealand, written by leading New Zealand scientists, advised that the magnitude of changes through to 2100 are likely to be comparable to that of natural variability. My interpretation of that is that any evidence of climate change could be evidence of a natural shift or one driven by human activities. Regarding rainfall, they advised it is as "likely as not" that we will see changes to rainfall.

Can anyone blame Maureen Pugh when confronted with this advice? And how will James Shaw provide evidence of climate change driven by human activities when the experts advise we won't be able to distinguish between natural and man-made?

As a New Zealand politician, Pugh's quest for evidence is reasonable. Amidst all the cries of 'its all around you' and 'look what happened last weekend' the only credible comment came from an expert - 'It might be a sign of what is to come.'

The pollies need to get off the self-serving bandwagon and get on with a decent support package for those affected areas. Taradale included!

Sean Rush is a former Wellington City Councillor. He has a Masters in Climate Change Science and Policy and was an Expert Reviewer for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Sixth Assessment Report.

[1] James Renwick "Sunday" 19 February 2023.

[2] SPM (A.3.4). https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg1/IPCC_AR6_WGI_FullReport.pdf

[3] AR6 wg 1, Atlas 6.2, page 1987 https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6/wg1/IPCC_AR6_WGI_FullReport.pdf

[4] <https://niwa.co.nz/climate/southwest-pacific-tropical-cyclone-outlook/southwest-pacific-tropical-cyclone-outlook-october-2022>

[5] [Extreme wind | Stats NZ](#).

[6] [Extreme rainfall | Stats NZ](#).

[7] [Wildfire risk | Stats NZ](#).

[8] [Frost and warm days | Stats NZ](#)

[\[9\]](#) 5th Assessment Report, Chapter 14, paragraph 14.8.13, page 1275 (Lead Author James Renwick, Review Editor, David Wratt).