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Not too late to change

AS Tasmanians bake under sweltering heat, choke under smoke-filled skies and watch in fear as wildfires burn out of control across the island, Americans are freezing to death in weather more akin to that on Mars than Earth.

As Huon Valley residents evacuated homes threatened by bushfire, people in Illinois were warned not to leave theirs as the wind chill factor was forecast to create a life-threatening -48C.

The contrast could barely be more extreme.

A dozen people died as temperatures plummeted below -30C across America's Mid-West and blizzards shut postal deliveries, schools and airports. Chicago recorded colder temperatures this week than Antarctica, the North Pole and Alaska.

As Americans froze,



EXTREMES: Geeveston volunteer firefighters extinguish a spot fire. Inset: Chicago shivers in the US. Pictures: CHRIS KIDD/GETTY

Australians baked.

Adelaide suffered an unprecedented 46.6C, Victorians endured power blackouts due to the electricity system failing to cope with the massive use of airconditioners, and more than 350mm of rain fell on Proserpine, north of Mackay, in just 24 hours.

These are precisely the extreme weather events that climate scientists have predicted as part of global warming — floods, bushfires, blizzards and more violent and destructive storms.

They have warned of this for decades. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change sketched out a fairly extensive outline in the mid-1990s.

Back in February 2001, I reported in these pages about an IPCC report that had just been released in Shanghai that found the 1990s to be the hottest decade since instrument records were first taken in 1861, and that 1998

was the hottest year on record.

The report found carbon dioxide in the atmosphere had increased 31 per cent since 1750 to be at its highest concentration in at least 420,000 years and probably in 20 million years.

The report warned of pest and disease outbreaks, droughts and storms.

I still recall the shock I felt all those years ago when I read this ominous IPCC report. I was bewildered by the lack of media coverage of such a diabolical forecast.

The planet's weather was changing because of greenhouse gas emissions being produced by the industrialisation of our civilisation.

This news should be

trumpeted from the hilltops.

"The predictions appear to follow the fearful biblical forecasts of pestilence, plagues and rivers of blood," I wrote in these pages 18 long years ago.

However, I pointed out that the IPCC differed with biblical doomsayers in that it says the greenhouse effect can be countered by cutting emissions.

I thought the catastrophic global threat could be met and overcome. The IPCC thought so too.

"Human-induced climate change should sound alarm bells in every national capital and in every local community," the 2001 IPCC report said.

"We must move ahead boldly with clean energy

technologies and we should start preparing ourselves for the rising sea levels, changing rain patterns and other impacts of global warming."

Back in 2001 I expected resistance from the fossil fuel industry, but failed to imagine how its business interests would penetrate so deeply into our political system and our communities.

Not in my wildest dreams did I expect Australian political leaders, prime ministers even, to turn their backs on their own scientists.

I never imagined a world where a PM would ignore and dismiss scientists in the CSIRO and Australian universities who were at the vanguard of research into the impending climate crisis.

But the fossil fuel industry has very effectively used the same tactic that kept business booming in big tobacco for decades despite evidence that it was selling death — the encouragement and deceitful manufacture of confusion, doubt and misunderstanding.

It is doubt and misunderstanding that creates the humour in American President Donald Trump's tweet this week about the freezing weather in the Mid-West: "What the hell is going on with global warming?" Trump joked. "Please come back fast!"

Climate scientists have explained time and again that global warming theory predicts an increase in weather extremes like those of this past

week against a climate backdrop of rising temperatures.

I wrote about it in these pages two decades ago, but still the "joke" persists and can be found in the comments section of nearly any story about climate change.

How much is this wilful ignorance and refusal to act costing? How much have governments spent fighting fires this week? How much trauma is being endured by Tasmanians in fear of their homes and lives?

How much is spent fighting rising sea levels with seawalls? How much is spent bulldozing shores with boulders and bolstering dunes with posts and netting only to see it washed away? Shoring up jetties, restoring boat ramps? How much?

How much is spent "adapting" to climate change?

How many local ecosystems are collapsing? How many ancient landscapes are being destroyed?

As American songwriter Bob Dylan asks in his song *Blowin' in the Wind*, how many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?

If, as Dylan says, the answer is blowing in the wind, it's in there with plumes of smoke and ash from the Tasmanian landscape ablaze.