

Memories of working with Sir John

Bruce Callander's contribution to a service of thanksgiving for the life of
Sir John Houghton, 14th May 2022

In January 1991 John, then Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office, appointed me as Head of the Technical Support Unit for Working Group 1 of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

The job of our unit, really a secretariat, was to co-ordinate the international teams of lead authors who wrote the different chapters of the IPCC *Science* report, then take the draft report through various stages of peer and country review, before its final approval by governments.

I remained in that post for five-and-a-half years, during which time I travelled the world with John (he became Sir John about a year into my tenure). I sat in airport lounges and on long flights with him, saw him in action chairing IPCC meetings, and benefitted from his guidance and wisdom as we steered, between 1991 and 1996, four IPCC reports to final approval and publication, culminating in the 2nd IPCC Assessment of 1996.

Those five plus years were the most pressurized and hectic of my career. They were also the highlight of my career and I wouldn't have missed them for the world. And for that I am immensely grateful to Sir John.

I joined IPCC shortly after the publication of the first IPCC Assessment. That report caused quite a stir, not least because it was seen as a major threat to the fossil fuel industry and to those countries whose economies were closely tied to the consumption or export of fossil fuels.

Consequently the coal, oil and gas industry geared up to monitor the activities of IPCC much more closely and to take every opportunity to discredit, undermine or slow down its activities.

Entering this world in 1991, I was immediately subjected to the intimidating tactics of the fossil fuel lobby. One of their lawyers, who became a perpetual presence at every IPCC WGI meeting, threatened "blood on the floor" if IPCC and John Houghton continued on the path set by the first IPCC report.

Integrity

In this environment I was grateful to be mentored by John. He didn't attempt to train me in Machiavellian politics, nor did he practice such politics himself. John believed that truth and integrity would ultimately prevail, and set the tone for IPCC working group 1, both among the scientists and among government representatives when they were in the room, that everything in the report must be based on a balanced appraisal of the scientific evidence, neither strengthened nor weakened to fit any political agenda.

In a period when vested interests used a range of tactics to undermine the reputation of key IPCC players, critics knew that there was little mileage in accusing John of dishonesty or a hidden agenda. Such a criticism just wouldn't be credible to those who knew him, even those who opposed him. His integrity assured the stability and robustness of the IPCC process.

Perception

A huge gift that John brought to IPCC was his ability to perceive what was really important, and to refuse to be distracted by secondary issues. The fact that John was one of the early voices “calling in the wilderness” about the looming threat of climate change is evidence of that.

Our unit would organize periodic drafting sessions for the lead author teams. John would sometimes attend these but in general would allow the lead authors to get on with the job. He never micromanaged.

But he had the uncanny ability to identify when a team needed help. Perhaps they were losing perspective and needed to refocus. John’s interventions were clear, encouraging, positive - and brief!

And the teams - composed of specialists and experts in their own field from all around the world - respected him and responded to his guidance. John had that rare gift: The Ability To Be Taken Seriously, even before he opened his mouth, quite remarkable in someone who was not physically tall or imposing.

All the lead authors in my experience worked incredibly hard for IPCC, giving freely of their time and expertise, travelling thousands of miles in the process and putting themselves in the firing line for unjustified criticism from non-experts. They would not have done so if they did not have full confidence in John’s personal honesty and his ability to defend the IPCC process against attack and disinformation.

Modesty

Mention has already been made of his modesty. I recall a conversation during a long flight when I must have turned a little bit reflective. “You know” I said, “when I look back over the last year, say, I reckon I have achieved, maybe, no more than three things”.

John replied, a little wistfully, “As many as three?”

Generous spirit

I have also reason to be grateful to John for his generous spirit. In the best traditions of the Meteorological Office, I was thrown in to IPCC at the deep end and expected to learn on the job. Inevitably I made mistakes and there were episodes when I would not have survived in the post if it had not been for John’s generous support and backing. His trust in me helped me to pick myself up, learn from the experience and move on towards the next challenge.

Christian Faith

It was John’s expression of his Christian faith that I perhaps found the most inspiring. He did not operate in two compartments - a life in science separated from a private life of faith. Everything was part of a single, integrated whole.

Prayer was natural for him. Waiting to go into what promised to be a difficult IPCC meeting in Nairobi I have particular memories of praying with him in the little hire car in the car park. What really impressed me was the strength and encouragement that he drew from prayer. He really did hand over his worries to God, believing that God was present and active in the

everyday events of life. He took seriously the words of the Psalm 46: “*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble ...*”

In IPCC meetings that could become tense and fractious, I never once saw John speak out of anger or frustration, or privately give vent to bitterness about the games that were being played by those whose sole aim was to destroy the IPCC process.

The IPCC Madrid meeting in 1995, subsequently labelled as ‘one of the meetings that changed the world’, achieved agreement among nations that human activity was having a “discernible” influence on climate. But the outcome was never guaranteed and for much of the meeting there was a real risk that vested interests might succeed in suppressing the scientific evidence that demonstrated the human causes of climate change.

I sat beside John for much of the time as he chaired the meeting. The final day ran way beyond the scheduled finish time, with a few coal- and oil-exporting countries continually raising objections. By the late evening John was mentally and physically exhausted. Bert Bolin, the overall IPCC chair, took over and he was in the chair when the critical text was finally agreed.

We eventually got to bed and slept but when I went to breakfast the next morning my mood was subdued, battered by the traumas and tensions of the previous day. Then John arrived, bright and with a skip in his step. “I think we achieved a lot yesterday. Real progress”.

For John, the kingdom of God was always moving forwards, and he had committed his life to being part of it.

Always faithful, always hopeful.

It was my immense privilege to know him.