

THE CLIMATEWARS, and the damage to science

By Matt Ridley, GWPF, 6 November 2015

At the heart of the debate about climate change is a simple scientific question: can a doubling of the concentration of a normally harmless, indeed moderately beneficial, gas, from 0.03% of the atmosphere to 0.06% of the atmosphere over the course of a century change the global climate sufficiently to require drastic and painful political action today? In the end, that's what this is all about. Most scientists close enough to the topic say: possibly. Some say: definitely. Some say: highly unlikely. The 'consensus' answer is that the warming could be anything from mildly beneficial to dangerously harmful: that's what the IPCC means when it quotes a range of plausible outcomes from 1.5 to 4 degrees of warming.

On the basis of this unsettled scientific question, politicians and most of the pressure groups that surround them are furiously insistent that any answer to the question other than 'definitely' is vile heresy motivated by self-interest, and is so disgraceful as to require stamping out, prosecution as a crime against humanity, investigation under laws designed to catch racketeering by organized crime syndicates, or possibly the suspension of democracy. For yes, that is what has been repeatedly proposed by respected and senior figures in the climate debate.

“CEOs should be tried for high crimes...”

James Hansen, former head of Nasa's Goddard Institute and the man whose congressional testimony in 1988 kick-started the whole debate, said a few years back, of fossil fuel company executives: 'In my opinion, these CEOs should be tried for high crimes against humanity and nature'.

As I am finishing this essay comes news that one of France's leading television weather forecasters, Philippe Verdier, has published a book arguing that he thinks the problem of climate change is being exaggerated. As a result he was first taken off the air and then unceremoniously sacked. Imagine, for a moment, that he had published a book saying the opposite: that climate change is going to be worse than we think. He would have been feted, rather than fired. This is censorship, and the fact that it is happening less than a year after, and in the same city as, the Charlie Hebdo killings, when the world joined together to say 'Je suis Charlie' and insist that free speech must be protected, is astonishing.

Recently 20 senior climate scientists wrote to President Obama and his attorney general to support a senator's call that the administration mount a 'RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) investigation of corporations and other organizations that have knowingly deceived the American people about the risks of climate change, as a means to forestall America's response to climate change'.

Remarkably, Dr Roger Pielke Jr, professor of environmental studies at the Center for Science

and Technology Policy Research at the University of Colorado, then discovered that that the lead signatory of the letter from the 20 scientists, Professor Jagadish Shukla of George Mason University, has been paying himself and his wife \$1.5 million a year, via his 'non-profit' Institute of Global Environment & Society Inc. of which he is President and CEO. The money came entirely from public grants climate grants and was on top of his \$250,000 university salary. Two of his daughters were also on the institute's payroll. Is it any wonder that he very much does not want anybody to conclude that climate change is a crisis? Is it any wonder he wants sceptics silenced by prosecution? And is it possible that the huge flow of money he receives has incentivised him to (in his own words) 'knowingly deceive the American people about the risks of climate change' in the other direction?

Scientists' disillusion with democracy

Meanwhile it is now commonplace to hear scientists and commentators express disillusion with democracy as a forum for resolving this issue. One scientist muses that forms of 'good' authoritarianism 'may become not only justifiable, but essential for the survival of humanity in anything approaching a civilised form', while a leading newspaper columnist wrote, of China's climate policy: 'one-party autocracy certainly has its drawbacks. But when it is led by a reasonably enlightened group of people, as China is today, it can also have great advantages'.

This vicious intolerance

To me, given that most environmental scares never turn out as bad as first feared, given that climate change has proceeded much more slowly and mildly than expected since 1990, and given that there is now a vast vested industry in alarm, thanks to munificent public funding, this feels like an over-reaction. That is to say, although I am in the 'possibly' camp, above, I cannot understand why so many people who should know better – in science academies, in parliaments and in international agencies – tolerate this vicious intolerance of a different position, let alone join in with it. Nor can I understand how so many politicians and scientists have grown more confident, not less, that future global warming will be catastrophically dangerous, even as estimates of climate sensitivity have come down and as real-world warming has consistently underperformed models, with the discrepancy growing larger every year.

After all, the climate worriers have largely won the policy argument: most of the world's governments pay lucrative lip service to the need to do something about climate change: subsidizing renewable energy, encouraging low-carbon fuels and taxing high-carbon ones, while preaching at their populations. Dr Shukla and others who worry about climate change receive about \$31 billion a year from the US federal government; their sceptical opponents receive almost nothing. Yet the partisans are not satisfied, constantly moaning about how nothing is being done. It is true that emissions are not yet falling, but that's because nobody has come up with an affordable substitute for fossil fuels – a problem of technology, rather than political will.

Most disappointing of all

Most disappointing of all is the way that science – especially the leaders of the world's science

academies – have joined in with gusto, not just demonizing those who say they are not convinced we face catastrophe, but turning a blind eye to the distortion and corruption of the scientific process itself. That’s what this essay is about. I am a ‘lukewarmer’: somebody who has come to think that climate change is likely to continue to be slow and mild, and that much greater humanitarian and environmental problems deserve more attention. I meet a lot of people who are skeptical and a lot of people who are alarmed. The latter have all the plum jobs, hefty grants and fat salaries. Yet respect for the scientific method is far more prevalent among the former. I genuinely worry that science itself is being damaged by this episode.

The full report can be downloaded at
<http://www.thegwpc.com/content/uploads/2015/11/climate-wars.pdf>