

Global warming: the chilling effect on free speech

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by Brendan O'Neill



The demonisation of 'climate change denial' is an affront to open and rational debate.

[**CSPP Note:** Here are some highlights to the following essay:

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"Behind the talk of facts and figures we can glimpse the reality: an authoritarian campaign that has no interest whatsoever in engaging us in debate but rather thinks up 'shrewd' ways to change the way we behave."

"we can see a creeping clampdown on any genuine, open debate about climate change, science and society. This represents a dangerous denigration of freespeech. When George W Bush said after 9/11 'You're either with us or against us', he was widely criticised. Yet greens, think-tanks, reputable institutions and government ministers are using precisely the same tactic, drawing a line between good and proper people who accept the facts about climate change and those moral lepers who do not; between those who submit to having their common sense nurtured by the powers-that-be and those who dare to doubt or debate. If anything, the green's black-and-white divide is worse than Bush's. At least his was based on some kind of values, allowing us the opportunity to say yes or no to them; the green's divide is based on 'facts', which means that those who decide that they are 'against' rather than 'with' can be labelled liars, deniers or crackpots like moon-landing conspiracy theorists or anti-Semitic historians."

"Effectively, campaigners and officials are using scientific facts - over which there is still disagreement - to shut down what ought to be a political debate about what humans need and want. This is the worst of it. Whatever side you take in the climate change clash of facts, this undermining of debate should be a cause of concern. In place of a human-centred discussion of priorities and solutions we have an unconvincing battle over the facts between two sides - between those in the majority who claim that their facts show the planet is getting a lot hotter and it will be a disaster, and those in the minority, the 'deniers', who say the planet is getting a little hotter and it won't be so bad. We could urgently do with a proper debate that prioritises real people's aspirations. If parts of the planet are likely to be flooded, then where can we build new cities and how can we transport the people affected by the floods to those cities? If natural disasters are going to become more frequent, then how can we urgently and efficiently provide poorer parts of the world with the kind of buildings and technology that will allow them to ride out such disasters, as millions do in America every year? We need to elevate the human interest

over the dead discussion of fatalistic facts - and challenge the 'You can't say that!' approach that is strangling debate and giving rise to a new authoritarianism. "]

Whoever thought that serious commentators would want it made illegal to have a row about the weather? One Australian columnist has proposed outlawing 'climate change denial'. 'David Irving is under arrest in Austria for Holocaust denial', she wrote. 'Perhaps there is a case for making climate change denial an offence. It is a crime against humanity, after all.' (1) Others have suggested that climate change deniers should be put on trial in the future, Nuremberg-style, and made to account for their attempts to cover up the 'global warming...Holocaust' (2).

The message is clear: climate change deniers are scum. Their words are so wicked and dangerous that they must be silenced, or criminalised, or forced beyond the pale alongside those other crackpots who claim there was no Nazi Holocaust against the Jews. Perhaps climate change deniers should even be killed off, hanged like those evil men who were tried Nuremberg-style the first time around.

Whatever the truth about our warming planet, it is clear there is a tidal wave of intolerance in the debate about climate change which is eroding free speech and melting rational debate. There has been no decree from on high or piece of legislation outlawing climate change denial, and indeed there is no need to criminalise it, as the Australian columnist suggests. Because in recent months it has been turned into a taboo, chased out of polite society by a wink and a nod, letters of complaint, newspaper articles continually comparing climate change denial to Holocaust denial. An attitude of 'You can't say that!' now surrounds debates about climate change, which in many ways is more powerful and pernicious than an outright ban. I am not a scientist or an expert on climate change, but I know what I don't like - and this demonisation of certain words and ideas is an affront to freedom of speech and open, rational debate.

The loaded term itself - 'climate change denier' - is used to mark out certain people as immoral, untrustworthy. According to Richard D North, author most recently of *Rich is Beautiful: A Very Personal Defence of Mass Affluence*: 'It is deeply pejorative to call someone a "climate change denier"...it is a phrase designedly reminiscent of the idea of Holocaust denial - the label applied to those misguided or wicked people who believe, or claim to believe, the Nazis did not annihilate the Jews, and others, in very great numbers.' (3) People of various views and hues tend to get lumped together under the umbrella put-down 'climate change denier' - from those who argue the planet is getting hotter but we will be able to deal with it, to those who claim the planet is unlikely to get much hotter at all (4). On Google there are now over 80,000 search returns, and counting, for the phrase climate change denial.

Others take the tactic of openly labelling climate change deniers as cranks, possibly even people who might need their heads checked. In a speech last month, in which he said people 'should be scared' about global warming, UK environment secretary David Miliband said 'those who deny [climate change] are the flat-earthers of the twenty-first century' (5). Taking a similar tack, former US vice president-turned-green-warrior Al Gore recently declared: 'Fifteen per cent of the population believe

the moon landing was actually staged in a movie lot in Arizona and somewhat fewer still believe the Earth is flat. I think they all get together with the global warming deniers on a Saturday night and party.’ (6)

It is not only environmentalist activists and green-leaning writers who are seeking to silence climate change deniers/sceptics/critics/whatever you prefer. Last month the Royal Society – Britain’s premier scientific academy founded in 1660, whose members have included some of the greatest scientists – wrote a letter to ExxonMobil demanding that the oil giant cut off its funding to groups that have ‘misrepresented the science of climate change by outright denial of the evidence’. It was the first time the Royal Society had ever written to a company complaining about its activities. The letter had something of a hectoring, intolerant tone: ‘At our meeting in July...you indicated that ExxonMobil would not be providing any further funding to these organisations. I would be grateful if you could let me know when ExxonMobil plans to carry out this pledge.’ (7)

One could be forgiven for asking what business it is of the Royal Society to tell ExxonMobil whom it can and cannot support – just as we might balk if ExxonMobil tried to tell the Royal Society what to do. The Society claims it is merely defending a ‘scientific consensus...the evidence’ against ExxonMobil’s duplicitous attempts to play down global warming for its own oily self-interest. Yet some scientists have attacked the idea that there can ever be untouchable cast-iron scientific facts, which should be immune from debate or protected from oil-moneyed think-tanks. An open letter to the Society – signed by Tim Ball, a professor of climatology at the University of Winnipeg, and others – argues that ‘scientific inquiry is unique because it requires falsifiability’: ‘The beauty of science is that no issue is ever “settled”, that no question is beyond being more fully understood, that no conclusion is immune to further experimentation. And yet for the first time in history, the Royal Society is shamelessly using the media to say emphatically: “case closed” on all issues related to climate change.’

Or as Charles Jones, an emeritus English professor at the University of Edinburgh, put it in a letter to a publication that recently lambasted climate change deniers, ‘[W]e are left with the feeling that [climate change] is a scientific model which is unfalsifiable and which has not been – and indeed cannot be – the subject of any theoretical counter-proposals whatsoever. As such, it must surely be unique in the history of science. Even a powerful model such as Relativity Theory has been the object of scientific debate and emendation.’ (8)

For all the talk of simply preserving the facts against climate change deniers, there is increasingly a pernicious moralism and authoritarianism in the attempts to silence certain individuals and groups. This is clear from the use of the term ‘climate change denier’, which, as Charles Jones argued, is an attempt to assign any ‘doubters’ with ‘the same moral repugnance one associates with Holocaust denial’ (9). The *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot recently celebrated the ‘recanting’ of both the tabloid *Sun* and the business bible *The Economist* on the issue of global warming. (‘Recant’ – an interesting choice of word. According to my *OED* it means ‘To withdraw, retract or renounce a statement, opinion or belief as erroneous, and esp. with formal or public confession of error in matters of religion.’ Recanting is often what those accused before the Spanish Inquisition did to save their hides.) Pleased by the *Sun* and *The Economist*’s turnaround, Monbiot wrote: ‘Almost everywhere, climate change denial now looks as stupid and as unacceptable as Holocaust denial.’ (10)

Earlier this year, when a correspondent for the American current affairs show *60 Minutes* was asked why his various feature programmes on global warming did not include the views of global warming sceptics, he replied: 'If I do an interview with Elie Wiesel, am I required as a journalist to find a Holocaust denier?' Here, climate change deniers are explicitly painted as the bad guys. He also argued that, 'This isn't about politics...this is about sound science', and went so far as to claim that it would be problematic even to air the views of climate change sceptics: 'There comes a point in journalism where striving for balance becomes irresponsible.'

Some take the moral equivalence between climate change denial and Holocaust denial to its logical conclusion. They argue that climate change deniers are actually complicit in a future Holocaust – the global warming Holocaust – and thus will have to be brought to trial in the future. Green author and columnist Mark Lynas writes: 'I wonder what sentences judges might hand down at future international criminal tribunals on those who will be partially but directly responsible for millions of deaths from starvation, famine and disease in decades ahead. I put [their climate change denial] in a similar moral category to Holocaust denial – except that this time the Holocaust is yet to come, and we still have time to avoid it. Those who try to ensure we don't will one day have to answer for their crimes.' (11)

There is something deeply repugnant in marshalling the Holocaust in this way, both to berate climate change deniers and also as a convenient snapshot of what is to come if the planet continues to get warmer. First, the evidence is irrefutable that six million Jews were murdered by the Nazis; that is an historical event that has been thoroughly investigated, interrogated and proven beyond reasonable doubt. (Although as the American-Jewish academic and warrior against Holocaust denial, Deborah Lipstadt, has pointed out, even the Nazi Holocaust is not above debate and re-evaluation; it is not a 'theology'.) There is no such proof or evidence (how could there be?) that global warming will cause a similar calamity. Second, it is, yet again, a cynical attempt to close down debate. The H-word is uttered as a kind of moral absolute that no one could possibly question. We are all against what happened during the first Holocaust, so we will be against the 'next Holocaust', too, right? And if not – if you do not take seriously the coming 'global warming Holocaust' – then you are clearly wicked, the equivalent of the David Irvings of this world, someone who should possibly even be locked up or certainly tried at a future date. At least laws against Holocaust denial (which, as a supporter of free speech, I am opposed to) chastise individuals for lying about a known and proven event; by contrast, the turning of climate change denial into a taboo raps people on the knuckles for questioning events, or alleged events, that have not even occurred yet. It is pre-emptive censorship. They are reprimanded not for lying, but for doubting, for questioning. If this approach was taken across the board, then *spiked* – motto: Question Everything – would be in for a rough ride.

Sometimes there is a knowing authoritarianism in green activism. The posters advertising George Monbiot's new book are targeted at various celebrities and businessmen judged to be living less than ethical green lives, with the words 'GEORGE IS WATCHING YOU' (12). It comes straight out of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Some institutions employ Orwellian doublespeak when they use the word 'facts'. They are not talking about submitting theories or hypotheses or evidence for public debate and possibly public approval – they are talking about using 'facts' precisely to stifle public debate and change the way people think and behave.

So in a report on global warming titled *Warm Words: How Are We Telling the Climate Story and Can We Tell it Better?*, the British think-tank the Institute for Public Policy Research argued that 'the task of climate change agencies is not to persuade by rational argument but in effect to develop and nurture a new "common sense".... [We] need to work in a more shrewd and contemporary way, using subtle techniques of engagement.... The "facts" need to be treated as being so taken-for-granted that they need not be spoken.' The IPPR proposes treating us not as free-thinking citizens who should be engaged, but as consumers who should be sold these 'unspoken facts': 'Ultimately, positive climate behaviours need to be approached in the same way as marketers approach acts of buying and consuming.... It amounts to treating climate-friendly activity as a brand that can be sold. This is, we believe, the route to mass behaviour changes.' (13)

Nurturing a new common sense? Changing mass behaviour? Behind the talk of facts and figures we can glimpse the reality: an authoritarian campaign that has no interest whatsoever in engaging us in debate but rather thinks up 'shrewd' ways to change the way we behave. From the description of facts as 'so taken-for-granted that they need not be spoken' to the lumping together of climate change deniers with Holocaust deniers – and even Holocaust practitioners – we can see a creeping clampdown on any genuine, open debate about climate change, science and society. This represents a dangerous denigration of free speech. When George W Bush said after 9/11 'You're either with us or against us', he was widely criticised. Yet greens, think-tanks, reputable institutions and government ministers are using precisely the same tactic, drawing a line between good and proper people who accept the facts about climate change and those moral lepers who do not; between those who submit to having their common sense nurtured by the powers-that-be and those who dare to doubt or debate.

If anything, the greens' black-and-white divide is worse than Bush's. At least his was based on some kind of values, allowing us the opportunity to say yes or no to them; the greens' divide is based on 'facts', which means that those who decide that they are 'against' rather than 'with' can be labelled liars, deniers or crackpots like moon-landing conspiracy theorists or anti-Semitic historians.

Effectively, campaigners and officials are using scientific facts – over which there is still disagreement – to shut down what ought to be a *political* debate about what humans need and want. This is the worst of it. Whatever side you take in the climate change clash of facts, this undermining of debate should be a cause of concern. In place of a human-centred discussion of priorities and solutions we have an unconvincing battle over the facts between two sides – between those in the majority who claim that their facts show the planet is getting a lot hotter and it will be a disaster, and those in the minority, the 'deniers', who say the planet is getting a little hotter and it won't be so bad. We could urgently do with a proper debate that prioritises real people's aspirations. If parts of the planet are likely to be flooded, then where can we build new cities and how can we transport the people affected by the floods to those cities? If natural disasters are going to become more frequent, then how can we urgently and efficiently provide poorer parts of the world with the kind of buildings and technology that will allow them to ride out such disasters, as millions do in America every year?

We need to elevate the human interest over the dead discussion of fatalistic facts – and challenge the ‘You can’t say that!’ approach that is strangling debate and giving rise to a new authoritarianism.

Visit Brendan O’Neill’s website [here](#).

- (1) [Himalayan lakes disaster](#), Margo Kingston, *Daily Briefing*, 21 November 2005
- (2) [Climate denial ads to air on US national television](#), Mark Lynas, 19 May 2006
- (3) [Why do people become climate change deniers?](#), Richard D North, Social Affairs Unit, 30 June 2005
- (4) [Why do people become climate change deniers?](#), Richard D North, Social Affairs Unit, 30 June 2005
- (5) [Miliband warns ‘flat earthers’ on climate change](#), *Herald*, 28 September 2006
- (6) See [Global warming: time for a heated debate](#), by Daniel Ben-Ami
- (7) [Royal Society tells Exxon: stop funding climate change denial](#), *Guardian*, 20 September 2006
- (8) [Letter to the RSA Journal](#), June 2006
- (9) [Letter to the RSA Journal](#), June 2006
- (10) [The threat is from those who accept climate change, not those who deny it](#), *Guardian*, 21 September 2006
- (11) [Climate denial ads to air on US national television](#), Mark Lynas, 19 May 2006
- (12) See the [Turn up the heat](#) website
- (13) See [Warm Words](#), published by the ippr, August 2006