

Weighing the Climate Change Scales

Today in America, no unanimous conclusion exists on the state of global warming. According to a Gallup poll, the majority of Americans still believe global warming is a firmly established phenomenon, but as for what is causing global warming, “50% say temperature increases are due to human activities, and 46% say they are not,”¹ and a portion of that forty-six percent doesn’t believe climate change is happening at all. When looking at each population, different emphases and motivations become apparent, particularly that climate change 'supporters' focus on environmental issues, and that climate change 'deniers' focus on economic, or financial, issues. The debate over which impact is of greater concern can be represented as a set of scales, with environmental impacts on one side, and financial impacts on the other. A through-and-through environmentalist assigns all the weight to the environmental impacts with no regard for the financial repercussions. The denial community is represented when the majority of the weight is given to the financial impacts, and the reason for this will soon be apparent. The particular examples that will illustrate this split between supporters and deniers involve the Irish film-maker, Ann McElhinney, and the Canadian military historian, Gwynne Dyer. The debate on climate change is strongly influenced by which impact, economic or environmental, is given more weight, and there are political and economic forces that affect the way people distribute this weight.

A method of identifying how economic, political, and financial factors influence the climate change denial movement is developed by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway in their article, "Challenging Knowledge: How Climate Science Became a Victim of the Cold War." The authors try to understand why a few rogue physicists, working under the guise of the Marshall Institute, took a stance opposite to the majority of other scientists of their time, and their investigation reveals that these physicists actively denied the links between cigarette smoke and lung cancer, pollution and acid rain, CFCs and the ozone, and greenhouse gases and global warming. Oreskes and Conway believe that the Cold War, anticommunist, pro-capitalism mentality was the motivation behind the denials. “Marshall Institute initiatives make sense when read as an expression of an uncompromising commitment to market capitalism – indeed, market fundamentalism – and a willingness to do whatever is necessary to prevent

¹ Frank Newport, “Americans' Global Warming Concerns Continue to Drop”
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/126560/americans-global-warming-concerns-continue-drop.aspx>

creeping government control.”² This notion of ‘market fundamentalism,’ and the implied disapproval of government regulation, is key to understanding the climate change denial trend. When market fundamentalism is applied to the environmental versus financial scales, almost all the weight goes with the financial impacts.

Ann McElhinney’s basic approach to climate change can be summed up in one simple quote: “There is no scientific basis for the current climate hysteria.”³ She consistently argues throughout her article, entitled “Kansas should not repeat Europe’s mistakes,” a reference to the recent cap-and-trade legislation passed in Europe, that any proposed solution to climate change will result in a financial detriment for everyday, average Americans. The evidence she quotes to support these arguments is derived solely from predicted economic impacts of various proposed actions such as climate change legislation. Here is a typical piece of evidence in her essay, this time supporting the construction of a new coal-fired power plant: “It will boost the economy and create thousands of jobs in construction and during many many years of operation. That’s real money for real people – and income in the form of tax revenue for the state.”⁴ In addition to appealing to the economic advantages of inaction to global warming, McElhinney also uses evidence to demonstrate that “environmentalists use alarmism to win support for economically devastating rules.”⁵ McElhinney’s opinions can be applied to the scales metaphor by placing “potential or doubtful environmental impacts” on one side, and the word “self-imposed economic hindrance” on the other. If there are no environmental impacts, then there are no advantages to implementing a solution to those impacts – instead there are only negative financial impacts. With this view of her arguments in mind, her strategies become clear. McElhinney is trying to reach her audience on a personal level by appealing to the financial impacts individuals will feel in their everyday lives.

In the article, McElhinney quotes a study done by the Heritage foundation claiming the cap-and-trade legislation being proposed in the Senate will cause the price of electricity in Kansas to jump by \$928 a year, and

² Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, “Challenging Knowledge: How Climate Science Became a Victim of the Cold War” in *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* ed. Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 76, 80

³ Ann McElhinney, “Kansas should not repeat Europe’s mistakes” available at <http://wichtaliberty.org/environment/kansas-should-not-repeat-europes-mistakes/> (accessed 10 Nov 2010)

⁴ McElhinney

⁵ McElhinney

“gas would cost \$1.31 more per gallon.”⁶ Notice how she quotes the price of gasoline per gallon rather than the price of a barrel of oil, as is heard in most news outlets. This is an example of her strategy to appeal to individuals rather than to the country as a whole. Her audience is everyday Americans, and in particular, conservative Americans of the Republican Party. The Heritage foundation, the source of the previous quote, is a Republican organization, as stated on their website. McElhinney has also spoken at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), a conference that is billed as the largest annual gathering of conservatives in the United States.⁷ Another tie between McElhinney and the Republican Party comes from the “Kansas should not repeat Europe’s mistakes” article itself. I found the article posted on a blog run by a Kansas conservative, and at the top of the website ran the tagline: “Individual liberty, limited government, and free markets in Wichita and Kansas.”⁸ McElhinney’s message of climate change denial is being supported and promoted by Republicans across the country. An article in the Washington Post said that, “Few causes unite the conservatives of the newly elected 112th Congress as unanimously as their opposition to government action on climate change.”⁹ The Oreskes and Conway methodology would describe the Republicans as the ‘market fundamentalists’ who strongly believe in capitalism and its ability to produce economic prosperity. When this ideology is applied to the metaphorical scales of economic impacts versus environmental impacts, nearly all the weight goes to the economic impacts, and environmental impacts become secondary. The final step toward denying climate change outright may be thought of as an attempt to keep *all* the weight with economic impacts.

The second article, “Climategate and Disbelief” by historian Gwynne Dyer, stands in direct opposition to the climate skeptics such as McElhinney. Dyer believes “the weight of the evidence rests overwhelmingly on the side of those who argue that climate change is real and dangerous,”¹⁰ which ties in perfectly to the scale metaphor, that is, that the environmental impacts far outweigh any financial incursions. He likes to quote

⁶ Ann McElhinney

⁷ “Donegal-born film-maker slams blockbuster 'Avatar'” available at <http://www.donegaldemocrat.ie/donegalnews/Donegalborn-filmmaker-slams-blockbuster-39Avatar39.6135188.jp>

⁸ Bob Weeks, “Voice for Liberty In Wichita”, available at <http://wichitaliberty.org/> (accessed 10 Nov 2010)

⁹ Bracken Hendricks, “Don't believe in global warming? That's not very conservative” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/05/AR2010110503155.html?hpid=opinionsbox1> (accessed 10 Nov 2010)

¹⁰ Gwynne Dyer, “‘Climategate’ and Disbelief,” available at <http://gwynnedyer.com/2010/climategate%e2%80%9d-and-disbelief/> (accessed 10 Nov 2010)

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports for evidence, and one such piece of evidence is, “Not all the Himalayan glaciers will be gone by 2035, but a lot of the ones at lower altitudes will be— including some of the ones that keep the great rivers of Asia full in the summertime. That is important, because when they are gone, people start to starve.” When comparing this evidence with McElhinney’s, it becomes clear that the two authors are indeed quoting evidence from two very different standpoints – environmental versus economic, and the fight over which one is more important is, perhaps, central to the climate change debate. Recently, the IPCC had a few scandals in which the integrity of the research being done proved to be subpar. Dyer comments that, “This sort of thing happens from time to time, because we are dealing with human beings. But it does not (as the denial brigade insists) discredit the whole enterprise in which they are engaged.”¹¹ This is a perfect example of the split between deniers and supporters of climate change. Many deniers of climate change often use the scandals as evidence that the research is flawed, which makes sense when one considers the market fundamentalism hypothesis. In order to defend and build an argument for their economic beliefs, they must minimize the negative impacts of global warming. On the other hand, Dyer is predisposed to play down this possible flaw in the predicted environmental impacts because he ultimately is convinced that climate change is real, and therefore needs to make the environmental impacts as strong as possible.

To get an idea of the audience Dyer is writing to, it is important to get a background on the historian. Gwynne Dyer has worked as a freelance journalist, columnist, broadcaster and lecturer on international affairs for more than 20 years, but he was originally trained as an historian. He received degrees from Canadian, American and British universities, served in three navies, and held academic appointments at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and Oxford University. His articles are published by over 175 papers in some 45 countries.¹² Dyer writes to a global audience about a very broad spectrum of topics. His most recent projects are a book and a radio series called 'Climate Wars', dealing with the geopolitics of climate change.¹³ This is contrasted with McElhinney’s appeal to the individual, and her documentary on climate change, “Not Evil, Just Wrong.” One is left to wonder how these different audiences, styles, and perspectives affect the message. Dyer’s geopolitical, global, highly educated

¹¹ Dyer

¹² “Gwynne Dyer” bio at bottom of page, available at <http://www.gwynnedyer.com/> (accessed 10 Nov 2010)

¹³ Dyer’s website

background has lead him to believe climate change is very real and that government regulation must be used to stop it; McElhinney focuses on effects individuals will feel and appeals to a conservative audience predisposed to agree with her message which protects the free market.

Dyer has a few comments in his article that express his own opinion of the climate change denial movement: “From being one of the least ideological countries fifty years ago, when much of the rest of the planet was drunk on Marxist theories, [the United States] has become the most ideological today. Disbelief in climate change has been turned into an ideological badge worn by the right, and evidence is no longer relevant.”¹⁴ This ideology Dyer speaks of could likely be based on the ‘market fundamentalism’ proposed by Oreskes and Conway. These two ideas, when combined, assert that climate change denial is driven solely by economic motivations, and this is demonstrated clearly by McElhinney and Dyer’s opinions on the relationship between China and US. McElhinney believes that climate change legislation is “nothing more than a stimulus bill for China, a country that will continue to emit carbon regardless [of US action].”¹⁵ McElhinney cannot see any reason why China would try to prevent global warming, but can clearly see that the US will be at an economic disadvantage. Dyer, in contrast, believes that “if the United States is out of the game, then China is out too,” indicating that if the US does attempt to mitigate greenhouse gases, China will do the same because climate change is a global threat with negative consequences for the planet. The two authors are clearly approaching the issue with different opinions.

The climate change debate is fundamentally split between those who believe the environment is worth protecting, and those who believe that they are defending the economy and their own financial prosperity. The environmental impacts, derived from years of neutral, scientific research, have massive effects on the global community, including economic effects. As Dyer points out, it is likely that the environmental impacts of climate change, such as the rivers in India drying up, will translate into massive economic impacts. Market fundamentalists, on the other hand, do not consider these types of long term, potential economic impacts, nor do they consider any scientific facts. They are concerned with the immediate repercussions individual Americans will feel, and how specific sectors of the economy will respond to government regulations of climate change solutions.

¹⁴ Dyer

¹⁵ McElhinney

To be more specific, McElhinney does not take economist's approach of factoring in all the economic disadvantages and *advantages*. In fact, she failed to quote a single economic advantage climate change solutions might bring, such as a boost in the green technologies sector. One is left to wonder where an ideology that avidly defends the use of coal, oil, and natural gas originated from.

Works Cited

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