

## A few words from the Director

**Public-interest science is under a great deal of pressure at the moment – with potentially serious consequences for society and the environment.**

In the summer, the UK government decided to give responsibility for policy on business, science and universities to a single Ministry – the newly created Department for Business, Innovation and Skills – the first time control of these three distinct areas has been under one roof. Then, in December, the government announced that funding for universities over the next three years was to be cut by over £900 million<sup>1</sup> – urging them to seek more funding from business. The government's aim is clear – to push for even closer links between commerce and academia – but the risk is that the independence and reliability of research and higher education is compromised. This has been highlighted by the latest in-depth report from SGR – *Science and the corporate agenda* (see p.5), which documents extensive evidence from the last 20 years of the detrimental effects that can and do arise when the commercialisation agenda becomes too powerful within science.

But the area of public-interest science that has come under the most fervent attack over the past couple of months has been climate science. Emails 'obtained' from the University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit (CRU) and released by climate sceptics on the eve of the Copenhagen negotiations caused a furore. Commentators – many with a clearly free-market ideology – seized on these as a 'smoking gun' that evidence was being falsified. Then came unusually cold winter weather, followed by the revelation of an

erroneous figure for glacier melt in the Himalayas in the last major report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In the UK, journalists from some sections of the press have been particularly quick to use these news stories to question whether global warming is even a problem. Sadly, many other people are now also starting to have doubts. Worse, these journalists are trying to discredit a range of senior climate scientists – such as the heads of the IPCC and the Met Office – and pour scorn on their organisations.

But these accusations are hardly a firm basis on which to dismiss decades of peer-reviewed climate research, publicly funded across the world through research councils and science foundations. Although a handful of the CRU emails were distasteful – and are under official investigation – others have been taken completely out of context, and together they hardly provide the evidence of conspiracy that the sceptics claim. (In contrast, the revelations of SGR's new report are much more damning.) As for the cold weather – any environmental science student could point out that climate change is about determining trends across the globe over decades, and cannot be dismissed due to one cold winter. And the Himalayan glacier error? It's certainly embarrassing for the IPCC, but in the context of the 3,000-page report, it's laughable to suggest that this negates the fundamental messages. It's worth remembering that, when the IPCC report was first published – back in early 2007 – there was some controversy over the figures for projected sea-level rise up to 2100. The IPCC had specifically opted to present conservative figures, not including the full contribution from global

ice-sheet melt, because of the uncertainties. In the years since the report came out, several academic papers have been published concluding that the contribution from ice-sheet melt is likely to *double* the IPCC estimates for total sea-level rise.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, the climate sceptics ignore such things. But given the very disappointing outcome of the Copenhagen climate negotiations (see p7), this media frenzy could become a real threat to timely action to tackle climate change.

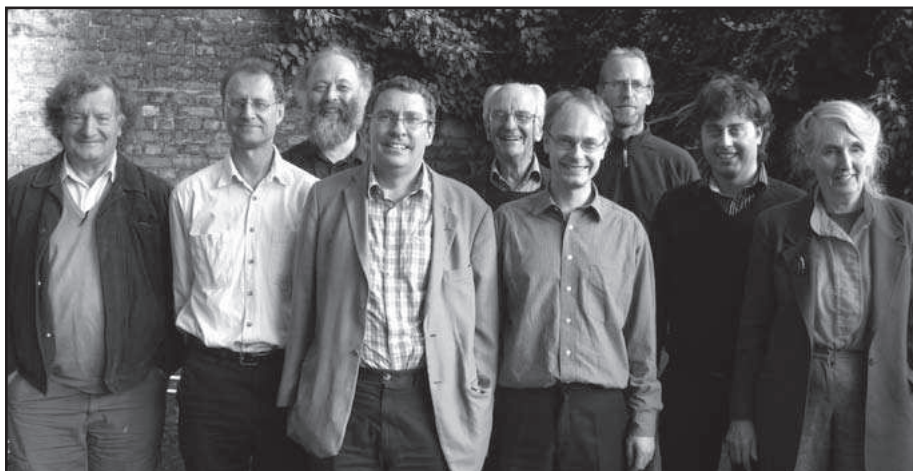
However, one thing that this furore has highlighted is the importance of openness. For example, the University of East Anglia's failure to respond adequately to Freedom of Information (FoI) requests helped fuel the initial media stories. SGR's 2008 report – *Behind Closed Doors* – had previously warned universities that they needed to markedly improve how they deal with FoI requests. Another example is the fact that peer-reviewed papers on climate science are normally only available on subscription-only websites, and data-sets are not always public. In contrast, climate sceptic material is freely available across the web. This can lead to a very distorted view of the evidence within wider society. Reforms are urgently needed if trust is to be restored.

Stuart Parkinson

### References

1. BBC news online (2010). 'Bleak future' for universities. 12 January. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8454545.stm>
2. See, for example: Rahmstorf S (2007). A semi-empirical approach to projecting future sea-level rise. *Science*, vol. 315, p368-3-70.

## The new National Co-ordinating Committee



Caption: Some of the new NCC and staff (from left to right): David Hookes, Philip Webber, Alasdair Beal, Tim Foxon, Roy Butterfield, Stuart Parkinson, Patrick Nicholson, Harry Tsoumpas, Kate Macintosh

The election for SGR's National Co-ordinating Committee (NCC) for this year was held during the Annual General Meeting on 24 October (see report on p.32). The new NCC is as follows:

Chair:	Philip Webber
Vice-chair:	Kate Macintosh
Treasurer:	Patrick Nicholson
Secretary:	Harry Tsoumpas

### Committee members:

Martin Bassant, Alasdair Beal, Roy Butterfield, Tim Foxon, David Hookes, Patricia Hughes, Rachel Marshall