

How influential are the climate change sceptics?

Stuart Parkinson looks at the factors that have led to the prominence of climate change sceptics over the past two decades and asks whether they are as influential as they seem.

In July, the Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature (BEST) project concluded that global temperature had risen 1.4°C over the past 250 years and that “essentially all of this increase results from the human emission of greenhouse gases”.¹ The thing that made this conclusion so significant was that the analysis was carried out by a group of scientists initially sceptical of climate change, and was part-funded by one of the Koch Foundations, which are major funders of US climate change sceptic groups.²

This could be the death knell of the mainstream public debate over whether global climate change is happening and whether humans are the main cause. But the debate has seemed settled many times before – not least when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published their second, third and fourth ‘assessment reports’ in 1995/96, 2001 and 2007 respectively – and the sceptics have proven stubbornly resilient.

Powerful friends

SGR reviewed the influence of climate change sceptics in its report *Science and the Corporate Agenda* in 2009.³ In it we looked at how large-scale funding by the fossil fuel industry, starting in the USA in the late 1980s, had brought the doubts of a small number of climate scientists into the public realm and had kept them there long after the issues had been settled within the scientific community. As the scientific evidence solidified, support from some corporations (e.g. Shell and BP) fell away while that from others (e.g. Exxon) continued, often via third parties such as public relations organisations and think-tanks.

These think-tanks were generally those espousing free-market views – such as the Heartland Institute – and so the political alignment with right-wing politicians and parties grew. Academics have pointed out that the overwhelming majority of climate change sceptic commentators in the USA have links with free-market/right-wing think-tanks.⁴ This political alignment became more deeply entrenched with the rise in prominence of former Democratic vice-president Al Gore as a climate change advocate in the mid-2000s. US opinion polls show that the views of Republican and Democrat supporters on this issue began to diverge strongly from that time onwards.⁵ And, of course, the political divergence in views has

been reflected in the media, with right-wing outlets increasingly taking a sceptical position.

Hence, the large-scale industrial, political and media support have proven to be a powerful combination for raising the profile of the climate change sceptics despite the lack of scientific backing for their views.

How influential are the sceptics really?

While the public profile of sceptics may be high in countries like the USA and UK, and the political influence within the USA is undeniable, it would be a mistake to assume this is universally the case.

For evidence, consider a recent analysis of media coverage of climate change scepticism which suggests that the sceptics’ high profile is largely an ‘Anglo-Saxon phenomenon’, being much more prominent in English-speaking countries.⁶ Coverage – even in right-leaning media – in countries such as France, India, Brazil and China gives considerably less attention to sceptics’ views. One possible explanation could be the type of economic system pursued in Anglo-Saxon nations. Academics Peter Hall and David Soskice have pointed out that such nations have historically pursued a stronger free-market approach, having been quicker to liberalise and de-regulate their economies.⁷ This culture may have increased political resistance to concepts of ‘environmental limits’ that are so central to tackling the problem of climate change.

It is also instructive to look at international opinion polls conducted between 2007 and 2010.⁸ These show high levels of concern across the major countries, with the average at around 85% considering climate change a ‘serious’ problem. Even in the USA – which polls the lowest levels of concern among the most powerful nations – this figure stands at about 70%. Concern has grown recently in China, India and Russia, but has fallen somewhat in some Western countries, including the UK. Are the sceptics to blame for this fall? More detailed analysis shows that it is actually more likely to be the cold winters that Europe and elsewhere have experienced recently.⁹

Indeed, the idea that the public’s direct experience of extreme weather has a more powerful influence over their views on climate change than criticisms of the science is given further credence by the latest opinion polling in the USA.¹⁰ This shows that belief in, and concern about, climate change is growing in the wake of record-breaking droughts in the country.

Waning support?

In the last year, the sceptics’ credibility has been dealt major blows – both by the BEST studies mentioned above and by the behaviour of leading climate sceptic think-tank, the Heartland Institute.¹¹ Firstly, there were revelations about Heartland’s secret strategies to undermine climate science. Then, Heartland launched a series of aggressive adverts including one that likened climate change believers to terrorists. Ashamed of this sort of campaigning, many of its corporate funders withdrew their financial support.

So are climate change sceptics finally a spent force? That view would be premature given their industrial, political and media support. Clearly, their political influence still needs to be challenged, especially in the USA and UK, but neither should we over-emphasise their limited importance.

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