

The 'Climategate' Scandal Should Not Be A Surprise

Terence Kealey, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham in Britain, is an interesting and iconoclastic scholar.

A scientist (biochemist) himself, his book *The Economic Laws of Scientific Research* challenges the idea that science is a public good requiring government subsidies.

The unravelling of the human genome by Craig Venter's Celera ahead of a government science project illustrates his argument.

Last month I heard Professor Kealey speak at an academic conference in Australia. His topic was the 'Climategate' scandal at the Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia. Subsequently, other global warming claims have been shown to be flawed, such as the disappearance of glaciers in the Himalayas predicted in the last IPCC report.

Kealey's basic point was: Why should we be surprised about all this? The assumption that scientists are always dispassionate seekers after truth is naïve, he argued.

Kealey reminded those who claim a scientific consensus about human-induced global warming of a similar consensus about eugenics – the science of controlled breeding – in the first half of the twentieth century.

We think of eugenics today as one of modern science's most horrible perversions and associate it with Hitler and Nazism. But eugenics ideas were once persuasive, as Kealey showed with quotes from well-known authors:

H G Wells (1901): "The swarms of black and brown and dirty-white and yellow people have to go. It is their portion to die out and disappear."

D H Lawrence (1921): "Three cheers for the inventors of poison gas."

And the appalling George Bernard Shaw (1933): “Extermination must be put on a scientific basis if it is ever to be carried out humanely and thoroughly ... if we desire a certain type of civilization and culture, we must exterminate the sort of people who do not fit into it.”

Such ‘scientific’ beliefs are dead today, but as Max Planck put it, “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”

Kealey illustrated the lengths to which some scientists will go in order to silence ‘sceptics’ by a historical event involving Pythagoras (of the Theorem).

Pythagoras was a good scientist and he revered ‘rational’ numbers (whole numbers or whole fractions). He believed that whole numbers underpinned the universe, from music to the movement of the planets.

But Pythagoras had a student called Hippasus who discovered that the square root of 2 is not a ‘rational’ number. It is in fact an ‘irrational’ number and Hippasus showed that irrational numbers can never be definitively calculated. This proof upset Pythagoras and he asked Hippasus to retract it. But Hippasus refused, so Pythagoras had him drowned.

Kealey wryly commented, “I think Pythagoras went too far; I think that scientists should desist from killing each other or even from telling outright falsehoods. But, like advocates in court, scientists can nonetheless be counted on to put forward only one very partial case ... and no one should expect a scientist to be anything other than a biased advocate.”

Such partiality has long been a feature of the global warming debate. One early proponent, the late Stephen Schneider, is notorious for saying, “To capture the public imagination, we have to offer up some scary scenarios, make simplified dramatic statements and little mention of any doubts one might have. Each of us has to decide the right balance between being effective and being honest.”

Former US Vice-President Al Gore made that approach into an art form. His film *An Inconvenient Truth* was found by a British court to contain nine significant errors in a context of “alarmism and exaggeration”.

In a leaked email, Climate Research Unit director Professor Phil Jones, referring to two papers that apparently falsified his work, wrote: “I can’t see either of these papers being in the next IPCC report. [New Zealand-born scientist Kevin Trenberth] and I will keep them out somehow – even if we have to redefine what the peer-group literature is!”

Here at home serious questions have been raised about the reliability of NIWA's posted domestic temperature record – leading NIWA's board to acknowledge the need to clarify the matter and publish the results.

The integrity of climate science has taken a hit with Climategate and its sequels. Scientific academies have been insisting on greater honesty and transparency.

Of course many reputable scientists continue to see a material risk of dangerous manmade warming. I believe their case needs to be taken seriously – most scientists are honest. But those in that camp should be the first to denounce exaggerated and erroneous claims by scientists that undermine confidence in their concerns.

On global warming it is nonsense to claim that “the science is settled”. Scepticism about science is always in order – indeed it is the essence of scientific inquiry.

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