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**SCEPTICISM
& SCIENCE**

**SHOME SHUBHODEEP
& TONY GILLAND**



**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

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MOTION:

**“SCEPTICISM
IS CRUCIAL TO
DEBATES ABOUT
CLIMATE CHANGE”**

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KEY TERMS

Anthropogenic Greenhouse emissions

'Climategate'

'Himalayan Blunder'

Copenhagen Accord

Fourth Assessment Report (AR4)

IPCC

INTRODUCTION

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Universities have often been centres of political radicalism The Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2007 jointly to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and Al Gore, former Vice-President of the United States, for 'their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change' [Ref: [Nobel Prize](#)]. However, the IPCC's acclaimed Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) that led to the Nobel Prize [Ref: [IPCC](#)] subsequently came under severe criticism for bias, factual errors and its reliance on 'grey literature' in 2010 [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. This itself followed the 2009 media storm that erupted around leaked emails from a pre-eminent climate institute – the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit (CRU) in the UK – which appeared to suggest that scientists had been manipulating or hiding data [Ref: [Guardian](#)], some of which underpinned the famous 'hockey stick' graph used by Al Gore in his documentary 'An Inconvenient Truth' and that took pride of place in the IPCC's influential Third Assessment Report (AR3) of 2001 [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Those sceptical about the IPCC's science were quick to brandish 'Climategate' as evidence of collusion by scientists wanting to pressurise the international community into following a green agenda [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. The reputation of climate science was further damaged in January 2010 when the IPCC was forced to recant a projection that Himalayan glaciers could disappear by 2035 [Ref: [BBC News](#)].

However, despite the 'febrile mood' that developed in the midst of 'climate-gate', the impact of the scandals has given some room for reflection [Ref: [BBC](#)]. The UK Government's chief scientific advisor John Beddington called for greater openness, arguing that 'science grows and improves in the light of criticism' and that it



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is unhealthy to 'dismiss proper scepticism' [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. Other commentators have concluded that scientists need to be more candid about the degrees of uncertainty in climate change predictions. An influential review of the processes of the IPCC by the InterAcademy Council, commissioned in response to the controversies, congratulates the IPCC on its achievements to-date but warns of the need for tighter procedures; most notably with regard to the 'characterisation of uncertainty' [Ref: [InterAcademy Council](#)]. Others, including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, are alarmed by the way in which they believe climate change sceptics have exaggerated the significance of a small number of errors to derail action on climate change [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. American economist Jeffrey Sachs accuses climate-change sceptics of being 'recycled critics of controls on tobacco and acid rain' seeking to discredit the scientific process [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In the midst of emotive accusations and counter-accusations, how should we come to a decision about the way forward on climate-change policies and, crucially, what role should scepticism play?

Is the scientific community guilty of alarmism?

India's Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh has labelled the tendency of the IPCC to highlight catastrophic scenarios 'climate evangelism' [Ref: [Times of India](#)]. Others accuse scientists of deliberately scaremongering. By emphasising hurricanes, floods, droughts and disappearing Islands they effectively frighten governments and the public into action. On this view, scepticism is vital to hold scientists to account and to make sure difficult questions are asked. Incidents such as the 'Himalayan blunder' or 'Climategate' have severely dented the credibility of the scientific community by creating the impression of a lack of openness to healthy criticism and alternative ideas. Even Lord Martin Rees, President of the Royal Society, admitted that the case for man-made climate change has been exaggerated as well as oversimplified by a section of scientists. Nevertheless, he and a majority of scientists as well as world governments reiterate that the science of man-made climate change is accurate and sound. An open letter by U.S. scientists declared: 'The significance of IPCC errors has been greatly exaggerated by many sensationalist accounts' [Ref: [Open Letter from Scientists](#)]. Furthermore, three separate inquiries have largely cleared the UEA scientists of allegations of misconduct or fraud, leading to accusations of it being climate change sceptics that are truly misleading the public [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

Scepticism or denial?

Climate scientists and sympathetic commentators have been quick to turn the tables. In response to 'Climategate', sceptics are depicted as focusing on bureaucratic errors and small technicalities to create gaps in otherwise incontrovertible

science [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Historically, critics of 'climate sceptics' have accused detractors of a narrow right-wing libertarian agenda and ties with big business interested in downplaying the significance of human-induced global warming [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. More substantially, others have sought to draw a line between legitimate scepticism and what they regard as flagrant denial of the overwhelming scientific evidence for the need to reduce carbon emissions significantly. In this vein, the journalist Johann Hari accuses climate change sceptics of adopting a 'faith-based position' [Ref: [Independent](#)].

'On the word of no one'

The motto of the preeminent 350-year-old UK scientific institution the Royal Society proclaims: 'Nullis in Verba' (translated: on the word of no one) [Ref: [The Royal Society](#)]. What constitutes legitimate scepticism in discussions about climate change is at the heart of this debate and is one in which the Royal Society itself is embroiled, following complaints from 43 of its Fellows that its latest report – 'Climate Change Controversies' – failed to draw a line between fact and conjecture [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. Elsewhere, German climatologist Hans von Storch and sociologist Nico Stehr have written that self-censorship is blighting the scientific community and has made it deaf to new insights competing with current explanatory models of climate change [Ref: [Spiegel Online](#)]. It has become exceedingly difficult, they claim, for sceptical scientists to disagree or challenge sensationalist accounts of climate change. British sociologist Frank Furedi critiques the 'highly charged, intemperate rhetoric' deployed against sceptics, arguing that scepticism is still 'the highest of duties' and is

underpinned by the belief that the truth is difficult to discover [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Others counter that sceptics present a fantastical story of a large number of decent, hard-working, conscientious researchers seeking to conspire in an unprecedented manner [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Furthermore, they argue sceptics take advantage of the fact that the worst effects of climate change will not be manifest for several decades and that they misrepresent the scientific process in the cause of espousing inaction. To present the public with the complexities of every scientific debate, it is argued, would downplay the scientific community's responsibility for providing society with the clearest answers possible [Ref: [Spiegel Online](#)].

A more honest debate?

The collapse of the Copenhagen summit in late 2009 indicates that the debate about climate change is as much a political one as it is scientific [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Professor of Climate Change Mike Hulme warns of the need for a more honest debate. According to Hulme 'political arguments masquerade as arguments about science' whilst 'legitimate differences about ideologies and values are reduced to trading blows about the 'right' numbers' [Ref: [chinadialogue](#)]. Climate change is thus not simply a scientific problem but also a social, economic and political one. Sceptics say the science is too uncertain to justify the huge costs of the radical measures being advocated to mitigate possible damage; measures that could fundamentally alter the global economy for an eventuality that may or may not come true. Others are vehement that ignoring the mountain of evidence is simply too risky a proposition, and that the result of stalling could spell human misery on an unprecedented scale.

Even the self-styled 'Sceptical Environmentalist' Bjorn Lomborg, has recently declared climate change to be 'one of the chief concerns facing the world' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. How to take the climate change debate forward requires us to grapple with these vexed questions about the role that science has to play, and the place for scepticism in the decision making process.

ESSENTIAL READING

Robin McKie versus Benny Peiser

Guardian 7 February 2010

In praise of scepticism

Justin Rowlatt *BBC* 17 December 2009

FOR

Why scepticism is still the 'highest of duties'

Frank Furedi *spiked* 26 April 2010

Man-made global warming: The climate-change "science" continues to unravel

Deepak Lal *Business Standard* 30 January 2010

Breed Controversy

Jug Suraiya *Times of India* 16 December 2009

A space for climate change sceptics

Benny Paisier *OpenDemocracy* 9 May 2005

How Global Warming Research is creating a climate of fear

Hans von Storch and Nico Stehr *Spiegel Online* 25 January 2005

AGAINST

Don't hound the climate scientists

Rajendra Pachauri *Guardian* 26 March 2010

Climate sceptics are recycled critics of controls on tobacco and acid rain

Jeffrey Sachs *Guardian* 19 February 2010

IPCC errors: facts and spin

RealClimate 14 February 2010

Is Climate Change for real?

Amit Bhattacharya *Times of India* 14 December 2009

How I wish that the global warming deniers were right

Johann Hari *Independent* 4 December 2009

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IN DEPTH

Climategate: too easy to blame the reporters

Fiona Fox *BBC* 22 July 2010

Tree ring circus

Steve Milloy *Washington Times* 12 May 2010

Heated debate

Mike Hulme *chinadialogue* 11 May 2010

Up in the air

Elizabeth Kolbert *New Yorker* 12 April 2010

Open Letter from US scientists on the IPCC

Open Letter from Scientists 13 March 2010

Spare us the scares

Bjorn Lomborg *Times of India* 27 February 2010

The FP Guide to Climate Sceptics

Christina Larson *Foreign Policy* 26 February 2010

Reason over emotion

Ashok Ganguly *Telegraph (India)* 24 February 2010

Real scientists are climate skeptics

Earth Institute Columbia University 8 December 2009

'Show your working': What 'ClimateGate' means

Mike Hulme and Jerome Ravetz *BBC* 1 December 2009

A climate scientist who engages sceptics

New York Times 27 November 2009

Death denial

George Monbiot *Outlook India* 4 November 2009

In praise of scepticism

Clive James *BBC* 23 October 2009

BACKGROUNDERS

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Copenhagen climate change conference 2009

Guardian 2010

Bjørn Lomborg: the dissenting climate change voice who changed his tune

Juliette Jowit *Guardian* 30 August 2010

The Climategate Whitewash continues

Patrick J. Michaels *Wall Street Journal* 12 July 2010

Climategate burned by reality

Gene Lyons *Salon* 7 July 2010

The arguments made by climate change sceptics

BBC 13 December 2009

Climate change

New Scientist

After Copenhagen: Heating Up the Debate About the Future spiked

ORGANISATIONS

IPCC

Pew Center on Global Climate Change

The Royal Society

IN THE NEWS

Review Finds Flaws in U.N. Climate Panel Structure
New York Times 30 August 2010

'Climategate' inquiry clears scientists of dishonesty
USA Today 7 July 2010

Dutch review backs UN climate panel report
MSNBC 5 July 2010

Royal Society to publish guide on climate change to counter claims of 'exaggeration'
Daily Telegraph 29 May 2010

Government's chief scientific adviser hits out at the climate sceptics
Guardian 28 May 2010

Climate sceptics rally to expose 'myth'
BBC News 21 May 2010

'No malpractice' by climate unit
BBC News 14 April 2010

'Climategate' scientists criticised for not using best statistical tools
Daily Telegraph 14 April 2010

Climate science must be more open, say MPs
BBC News 31 March 2010

US oil company donated millions to climate sceptic groups
John Vidal *Guardian* 30 March 2010

Climate scientists are losing ground against denier's disinformation
Guardian 15 February 2010

India to have own panel on climate change: Jairam Ramesh
Times of India 4 February 2010

Science chief John Beddington calls for honesty on climate change
The Sunday Times 27 January 2010

UN's climate body admits 'mistake' on Himalayan glaciers
BBC News 19 January 2010

Ramesh turns heat on Pachauri over glacier melt scare
Times of India 19 January 2010

India must not lag behind in climate change initiatives: PM
Times of India 3 January 2010

Low targets, goals dropped: Copenhagen ends in failure
Guardian 19 December 2009

Climate sceptics: are they gaining credence?
Guardian 4 December 2009

Hackers target leading climate research unit
BBC News 20 November 2009

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ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

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Professional role (if applicable)

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School/work phone

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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

