

“CONSENSUS” ON CLIMATE CHANGE STIFLES DEBATE SURROUNDING PUBLIC POLICY

Kyle Sholes

“SURELY INTERVENTION
IS NECESSARY TO STOP THE
EFFECTS OF CLIMATE
CHANGE!”

“CAN’T WE DISCUSS
SOME OF THE OTHER
CLIMATE CHANGE
THEORIES?”



Government action on climate change has become commonplace in Canada and in many countries around the world—look no further than the 190 countries that were represented at the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (COP21 Paris, 2015). To name a couple of examples of climate change action in Canada, British Columbia (2016) put in place a carbon-tax in 2008 and Ontario (2016) recently released a five year Climate Change Action Plan in which it plans to reduce emissions and transition to a low-carbon economy. These plans and policies are reflective of the government’s belief that intervention is necessary to stop the effects of climate change. Indeed, Canada’s Environment Minister, Catherine McKenna, has stated that climate science is “indisputable, and [the Government of Canada recognizes] the need for urgent/greater action” (2015).

Words like “indisputable” and “the need for urgent action” limit the scope of debate, relying on claims of perceived experts to justify any and all policy decisions without room for discussion.

Our government’s desire to enact climate change-focused public policy—and the effects of such policies— are topics for a different discussion; here the rhetoric used to support these decisions is the concern. Words like “indisputable” and “the need for urgent action” limit the scope of debate, relying on claims of perceived experts to justify any and all policy decisions

without room for discussion. But, as will be shown, not all of these experts’ claims are as reliable as our politicians make them out to be.

While the specific areas of “indisputable” science to which McKenna refers are unclear, one such widely used claim is that 97% of scientists believe climate change is real and man-made. US President Barack Obama backs the claim— from here on referred to as the 97% claim—with a tweet saying that “ninety-seven percent of scientists agree: #climate change is real, man-made and dangerous” (2013). Obama’s tweet is linked to an article about a study lead by John Cook in which the 97% claim is established.



Cook’s work provides an excellent case study on how consensus-based rhetoric can be misused by policy makers in public debate.

Cook and his colleagues’ conclusion,

that there is consensus among 97% of scientists on anthropogenic—man-made—global warming (AGW), is drawn from analyzing the abstracts of about 12,000 peer-reviewed scientific articles that appeared using the search terms “global climate change” or “global warming” (Cook et al., 2013). The 97% claim is reached by organizing these abstracts into three broad groups: those that endorse the consensus, those that reject it, and those that do not take a stance on AGW (Cook et al., 2013).

With this in mind the 97% claim leaves many questions—both about its reliability and its implications—unanswered.

Although seemingly simple, organizing the abstracts is based heavily on inference and assumption. For example, the study further classifies endorsements as either explicit or implicit, meaning some articles are considered endorsements based on an interpretation of what their authors might be *implying* (Cook et al., 2013). Many scientists have spoken out against the study, saying their work was misrepresented by the Cook’s conclusion; a fact which questions the reliability of the 97% claim (Forbes, 2013, May 30).

Further, the 12,000 abstracts used give false legitimacy to the study, for although nearly 12,000 articles were identified, 66.4% of them did not take a stance on AGW (Cook et al., 2013). Instead, the 97% claim is based off of the abstracts in which there was a judgement made; those which took no stance are not considered in the

claim, which again calls into question its accuracy.

In addition to these uncertainties, the 97% claim is vague and often used to support arguments beyond its scope. On its own, the claim simply suggests that some amount of human activity is causing a certain degree of warming. The claim does not substantiate to what extent human activity causes warming, how much warming is being caused, and, most importantly, if this phenomenon is a danger to human health, either now or in the future.

With this in mind the 97% claim leaves many questions—both about its reliability and its implications—unanswered. Unfortunately when policy-makers discuss claims like these with absolute certainty, these questions may not be fairly considered. However, it is possible that if the perceived irrefutability of the 97% claim is suspended, more debate may take place and new complexities could be added to the discussion that ought to play a role in public discourse.

One such complexity is found in a study by the Cato Institute climate scientists Patrick Michaels and Paul Knappenberger (2015), which questions levels of equilibrium climate sensitivity—the amount surface temperatures will rise when carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere double—used by many climate models.

In their study, Michaels and Knappenberger (2015) argue that traditional climate models overestimate equilibrium climate

sensitivity leading them to consistently predict global temperatures much higher than we have experienced. Michaels and Knappenberger (2015) suggest that if a lower estimate were used, warnings of dangerous global warming would turn into predictions of benign global “lukewarming.” This is significant because estimates of future warming are used to assess what the human costs of climate change might be, and if warming is overestimated so too would be the potential costs and risks of climate change.

Unfortunately, the rhetorical path taken by many policy makers today supports their decisions without allowing these questions to be debated.

This is not to say that Michaels and Knappenberger are right, but rather to illustrate how rhetoric may stifle debate. If the 97% claim is taken at face value and the climate science favoured by many policy-makers is considered “irrefutable”, Michaels and Knappenberger’s theories may not get the chance to be considered. Regardless of who is right or wrong, our government’s decisions ought to be subject to rigorous and critical questioning. Unfortunately, the rhetorical path taken by many policy makers today supports their decisions without allowing these questions to be debated. 



Kyle Sholes was the Natural Resources Centre intern at the Fraser Institute this summer. He has a Political Science Honours degree from Huron University College at the University of Western Ontario.

References

- British Columbia, Ministry of Finance (2016). *Carbon Tax*. Province of British Columbia.
- Cook, John et al. (2013). Quantifying the consensus on anthropogenic global warming in the scientific literature. *Environmental Research Letters*. 8, (January): 1-7. <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/8/2/024024/pdf>, as of July 8, 2016.
- COP21 Paris (2015). Find out more about COP21. <http://www.cop21paris.org/about/cop21/>, as of July 25, 2016
- McKenna, Catherine (2015). *Twitter: Minister C. McKenna*. https://twitter.com/ec_minister/status/663403141795340288, as of July 25, 2016.
- Michaels, Patrick and Paul Knappenberger (2015). *Climate Models and Climate Reality: A closer look at a lukewarming world*. Cato Institute. <http://www.cato.org/publications/working-paper/climate-models-climate-reality-closer-look-lukewarming-world>, as of July 26, 2016.
- Obama, Barack (2013). *Twitter: Barack Obama*. <https://twitter.com/barackobama/status/335089477296988160>, as of July 13, 2016.
- Ontario (2016). *Climate Change Action Plan*. Government of Ontario.
- Taylor, James (2013, May 30). Global Warming Alarmists Caught Doctoring ‘97-Percent Consensus’ Claims. *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jamestaylor/2013/05/30/global-warming-alarmists-caught-doctoring-97-percent-consensus-claims/#7c78bbd15909>, as of July 27, 2016.