

“Doctors, Soldiers & Climate Change”

Tom Spencer, Vice Chairman Institute for Environmental Security
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Mr Chairman,

As you point out, I have divided the last three decades between fifteen years as a Conservative Member of the European Parliament, dealing with climate change issues and foreign policy and fifteen years as Executive Director of the European Centre for Public Affairs, teaching lobbying and decision making. I note that the motto of the British Medical Association is “With Head, and Heart, and Hand”. For today’s subject I want to interpret that as the Head being about science, the Heart being about our motivation to care about global warming and the Hand being about lobbying! I trust that this exercise in motto-abuse will be acceptable in the good cause which we are discussing today, for I believe that the combination of doctors and soldiers is a politically unstoppable combination.

Many years ago, before I went to the European Parliament, I worked in advertising. I learned that facts are not enough. Being right is not enough. Above all you need a good story, professionally told. ‘Climate Denial’ is the most important public affairs campaign in human history, having already delayed the UNFCCC negotiations by ten years. It is well financed and uses every technique in the public affairs toolbox. As James Hoggar’s book “Climate Cover-Up: The Crusade to Deny Global Warming” points out, the campaign modelled itself on that conducted a generation earlier by the tobacco industry. The belief that ‘uncertainty is our ally’ has been triumphantly vindicated by the campaign’s success in the USA. As long ago as 1992 a group of climate deniers were assuring me that they had ‘a chokehold on the US Congress’. When I enquired as to their tactics in Europe, they explained that they would present climate change as being about increased taxation and that this would be supplemented by ‘confusing the science’. Twenty years on, their plans have gone pretty well.

Next in line are European politicians from Centre Right parties. Until last Friday one might have thought that the British had found the ideal solution of putting a doctor in charge of the Ministry of Defence. However we now see that in private the ambitious Doctor Fox was consorting with anti-European climate deniers such as the Koch brothers of Koch Industries, who had funded the initial organisers of the Tea Party. There should be no natural link between Euro-scepticism and Climate Scepticism, but lobbies know their targets well.

Jon Snow, in this morning's session, was encouraging us to tweet as a gateway to further knowledge. Given the media's culpability and naivety in the face of the climate deniers, I suggest that we should all tweet him with the title of a few good books!

Jay Gulledge a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, has written brilliantly on the communication of science to policy makers. He points out the skills necessary to be a good scientist are not the same as those needed to be a good communicator. I am nervous of using a reference to the autism spectrum in these august surroundings, but it is exactly the good scientist's obsession with his subject and constant striving to replace one hypothesis with a stronger one that the climate deniers have misrepresented and exploited. Between the science and its communication to policy makers including the military, there exists a small, dark gap. Into that gap have stepped the most sophisticated of public affairs operations. We must shine some light into that gap.

Let us turn from the Hand to the Head. A second volume for Jon Snow's bookshelf should be Cleo Paskal's "Global Warring". She and others have pointed out that climate change is Abrupt and not Linear. Politicians much prefer the thought of climate change as slow and linear, allowing them time to delay decisions on the NIMTO basis - Not In My Term of Office. Abrupt Climate Change is also an important consideration in the mind of the military in that early impact moves the issue from the theoretical to the immediate in terms of military planning. Cleo also underlines the other great myth encouraged by climate deniers to undermine political activism on the issue. This is the assertion that climate change impacts will affect 'Them and not Us'. The widespread belief that the poor nations of the world will suffer most encourages what you might call the 'leave it to Bono' reaction. In fact complex societies in the developed world have less 'resilience' in the face of extreme climate events than simpler societies. She quotes a good example, of acute business relevance, by pointing out that many of the hub financial cities on which global business depends are located in low lying or delta areas such as London, Amsterdam, New York, Mumbai, Shanghai and Singapore. Sea level rise from the melting Greenland Glacier would wipe them all out.

We should not be paralysed by the task before us. Co-operation between the global military in the context of the Montreal Protocol has already succeeded in removing CFCs from military usage in what is a well documented, but under-reported case study. It is important that we understand the global dimension of the action which is necessary. The Institute for Environmental Security has a distinguished Military Advisory Council of which Admiral Morisetti is a member. It is chaired not by an American or a Brit, but by Air Marshal (Ret) AK Singh from India. This is entirely appropriate as the greatest environmental security impacts on human health are to be found in the issues associated with the dependence of much of Asia on summer glacial

melt water in the great rivers that rise in the Tibetan 'water tower'. In this case climate change is not just a 'threat multiplier', it is a bona fide cause of conflict in its own right. Cleo Paskal would point to the security implications of an ice free Russian Arctic in the same way.

Finally let us return to the Hand. I seem to have spent much of my life attending conferences where Tim Lang makes witty and incisive speeches that somehow miss the mark. While I agree with much of what Tim had to say this morning, we cannot move 'straight to the solution'. We have to make sure that we understand the process first. The climate deniers will win unless we can match their discipline and trump their money with our credibility. In this struggle doctors and soldiers have a particular responsibility. The military and the medics are amongst the few authority figures who retain public trust in Western societies. Politicians are frightened of both. Both deal with issues of life and death. The doctor's consulting room is a credible venue in which to bridge the yawning gap between the individual and the damage to society of global warming. For many years I resisted using mobile phones because of potential brain damage. I suspect that more of our fellow citizens are worried about small risks such as that, than they are by the clear and present danger presented by the impact of climate change on both our health and our security.