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Tell people something they know already and they will thank you for it.
Tell them something new and they will hate you for it.

Faced With This Crisis

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The G8 leaders refuse to accept that anything difficult needs to be done about climate change

By George Monbiot. Published in the Guardian, 12th July 2005.

One day we will look back on the effort to deny the effects of climate change as we now look back on the work of Trofim Lysenko.

Lysenko was a Soviet agronomist who insisted that the entire canon of genetics was wrong. There was no limit to an organism's ability to adapt to changing environments. If cultivated correctly, crops could do anything the Soviet leadership wanted them to do. Wheat, for example, if grown in the right conditions, could be made to produce rye.

Because he was able to mobilise enthusiasm among the peasants for collectivisation, and could present Stalin with a Soviet scientific programme, Lysenko's hogwash became state policy. He was made director of the Institute of Genetics and president of the Lenin Academy of Agricultural Sciences. He used his position to outlaw conventional genetics, strip its practitioners of their positions and have some of them arrested and even killed. Lysenkoism, which governed state science from the late 1930s until the early 1960s, helped to wreck Soviet agriculture.

No one is yet being sent to the Guantanamo gulag for producing the wrong results. But the denial of climate science in the United States bears some of the marks of Lysenkoism. It is, for example, state-sponsored. Last month, the New York Times revealed that Philip Cooney, a lawyer with no scientific training, had been imported into the White House from the American Petroleum Institute, to control the presentation of climate science.(1) He edited scientific reports, striking out evidence that glaciers were retreating and inserting phrases suggesting that there was serious scientific doubt about climate change.(2) Working with the Exxon-sponsored PR man Myron Ebell, he lobbied successfully for the sacking of the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, who had refused to accept the official line.(3)

Cooney's work was augmented by Harlan Watson, the US government's chief climate negotiator, who insisted that the findings of the National Academy of Sciences be excised from official reports.(4) Now Joe Barton, the Republican chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, has launched a congressional investigation of three US scientists whose work reveals the historical pattern of climate change. He has demanded that they hand over their records and reveal their sources of funding.(5)

Perhaps most pertinently, the official policy of climate change denial, like Lysenkoism, relies on a compliant press. Just as Pravda championed the disavowal of genetics, so the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Times, the Daily Mail and Daily and Sunday Telegraphs champion the Bush team's denial of climate science. Like Pravda, they dismiss it without showing any sign that they have read or understood it.

But climate change denial, like Lysenkoism, cannot last forever. Now, as the G8 communique shows, the White House is beginning to move on.(6) Instead of denying that climate change is happening, it is denying that anything difficult needs to be done to prevent it. The other G8 leaders have gone along with this.

Faced with the greatest crisis humanity has ever encountered, the most powerful men in the world have meekly resolved to “promote” better practice and to “encourage” companies to do better. The R-word is half-mentioned twice: they will “improve regulatory ... frameworks.”(7) This could mean anything: most of the G8 governments define better regulation as less regulation. Nowhere is there a clear statement that they will force anyone to do anything to stop destroying the conditions which sustain human life.

Instead they’ve agreed to “raise awareness”, “accelerate deployment of cleaner technologies” and “diversify our energy supply mix”. There is nothing wrong with these objectives. But unless there is regulation to reduce the amount of fossil fuel we use, alternative technologies are a waste of time and money, for they will supplement rather than replace coal and oil and gas burning. What counts is not what we do but what we don’t. Our success or failure in tackling climate change depends on just one thing: how much fossil fuel we leave in the ground. And leaving it in the ground won’t happen without regulation.

They agreed to support energy efficiency, which would be a good thing if it didn’t rely on a “market-led approach”. Otherwise, they will cross their fingers and place their faith in a series of technofixes, some of which work, and some of which cause more problems than they solve. They will study the potential of “clean coal”, which so far remains an oxymoron, and accelerate the burial of carbon dioxide, which might or might not stay where it’s put. They will promote “carbon offsets” (you pay someone else to annul your sins by planting trees or building hydroelectric dams) which have so far been a disastrous failure.(8) They will encourage the development of hydrogen fuel cells, which do not produce energy but use it, and the production of biofuels, which will set up a competition for arable land between cars and people, exacerbating the famines climate change is likely to cause.(9) Not bad for six months of negotiations.

We can’t blame only the Americans. While Bush’s team has been as obstructive as possible, the UK has scarcely been doing the work of angels. Like Bush, Blair will contemplate anything except restraining the people who are killing the planet. While the UK produces 2.2% of the world’s greenhouse gases, the companies which extract the fossil fuels responsible for over 10% of global emissions are listed on the London Stock Exchange.(10) One of the reasons they find London attractive is that, thanks to our lax financial regulations, they are not obliged to reveal their potential greenhouse liabilities to investors. Far from doing anything about this, Blair complains that our financial rules are “hugely inhibiting of efficient business”.(11)

Our problem is that, just as genetics was crushed by totalitarian communism, meaningful action to prevent climate change has been prohibited by totalitarian capitalism. When I use this term I don’t mean that the people who challenge it are rounded up and sent to break rocks in Siberia. I mean that it intrudes into every corner of our lives, governs every social relation, becomes the lens through which every issue must be seen. It is the total system which leaves no molecule of earth or air uncosted and unsold. And, like Soviet totalitarianism, it allows no solution to pass which fails to enhance its power. The only permitted answer to the effects of greed is more greed.

I don’t know how long this system can last. But I did see something in Scotland last week that I hadn’t seen before. At the G8 Alternatives meeting in Edinburgh and the People and Planet conference in Stirling, climate change, until recently neglected by campaigners, stirred fiercer emotions than any other topic. People are already mobilising for the demonstrations planned by the Campaign against Climate Change on December 3rd.(12) I saw a resolve there to make this the biggest issue in British politics. If we succeed, the new campaign will crash head-on into the totalitarian system. But as more people wake up to what the science is saying, it is not entirely certain that the system will win.

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