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Climate Change Scepticism: A Form of Fundamentalist Belief?

By Kalicharan Veera Singam

Synopsis

The scepticism over climate change persists although adverse effects from a warming planet are already being felt. Is such scepticism, predicated upon belief, a form of fundamentalism?

Commentary

THE EARTH is warming. NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, takes the view that the scientific data on climate change are conclusive. The polar ice caps are melting, their white reflective surface replaced by the ocean's blue which absorbs more heat, setting up a feedback loop that accelerates the warming process. In the coming decades, the rising sea level could inundate and sink low lying coastal regions around the world.

More droughts, heat waves, stronger hurricanes and other extreme climate events are expected. Effects from climate change are being felt across the planet and without urgent action, runaway climate change could result in extreme climate events becoming the norm. In spite of the looming crisis, there has been great reluctance to address the problem, and in extreme cases, even to acknowledge that it is a problem.

Anthropogenic Climate Change Scepticism

Anthropogenic climate change scepticism is often understood as the lack of conviction over the scientific consensus that climate change is caused by human activity. However, in the climate change discourse, scepticism does not just refer to a lack of conviction, but an outright rejection of the phenomenon.

The logical corollary from the scepticism is that reductions in CO₂ emissions and the

transition to renewable sources of energy are unnecessary and perhaps even undesirable. Sceptics use a variety of arguments to discredit the consensus on climate change, some of which are shown in the table below.

Table 1: The basis and rationale for climate change scepticism

<i>Basis for Scepticism</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
Scientific	'Gaps' in the data; Climate models are unreliable
Epistemological	Methodological issues in delineating anthropogenic or man-made causes from natural causes
Theological	A literal interpretation of man's "dominion" over nature from religious doctrines
Ideological	The perceived incompatibility between acceptance of climate change and conservative values

Climate Change Scepticism as a Matter of Belief

The persistence of scepticism, in spite of the overwhelming evidence that shows otherwise, could be attributed to the framing of the issue by sceptics as one that is based on their belief about climate change. By characterising it as a belief and not as a position derived through objective study, they make their stance independent of scientific reasoning.

Beliefs, unlike scientifically derived positions, tend to be immutable and do not readily lend themselves to scrutiny for they lie outside the realm of evidence-based reasoning. Also, beliefs by virtue, may not change even when new and overwhelming evidence proves those beliefs to be unfounded.

Characterising climate change scepticism as a form of belief could explain the persistence of scepticism and the lack of progress being made in convincing sceptics to change their mind on the issue. President Donald Trump, perhaps the most high profile sceptic, has described climate change in terms that suggest he considers it a matter of belief.

The president skipped the session on climate change during the recent G7 summit, which follows a pattern of behaviour where he has repeatedly expressed scepticism over the issue. The president's unwavering stance on the issue could presumably be due to his firm belief that climate change is not happening or even if it did, it is not caused by human activity and is not as big a problem as climate experts have argued.

His scepticism, while being emblematic of his stance on issues in general being opposed to that of other Western countries and challenges established norms, is also representative of the views held by a sizeable group that make-up his Republican base.

Is Climate Change Scepticism Fundamentalist?

While religious and other identity-based exclusivist behaviour are readily identified as

fundamentalist, climate change scepticism is not. This might be due to sceptics being given the benefit of the doubt that they are engaging in an honest scientific debate over the issue.

However, sceptics' immutable stance and their concerted campaigns to undermine policies that are meant to address climate change call for an assessment on whether their scepticism could qualify as a form of fundamentalism, albeit one that is issue-based and non-violent.

A case for climate change scepticism being fundamentalist could be made for the following reasons: Sceptics' stance on climate change are completely removed from reality and has been shown to be immutable even when glaringly obvious facts that contradict the basis for their scepticism were presented.

Second, sceptics have displayed a religion-like faith in maintaining their position and have used distorted data and conspiracy theories in defence of their claims and to politicise the issue. Third, whilst the sceptic rhetoric does not call for violence, the inaction borne out of scepticism holds the potential to harm millions of lives that could dwarf the damage that could be caused by other 'mainstream' forms of fundamentalist and extremist behaviour.

Although climate change as a non-traditional security issue has received considerable attention, the scepticism that feeds inaction on climate change has not. The belief and the fundamentalist overtones that complicate the climate change discourse should also be addressed for there to be progress on the issue.

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