

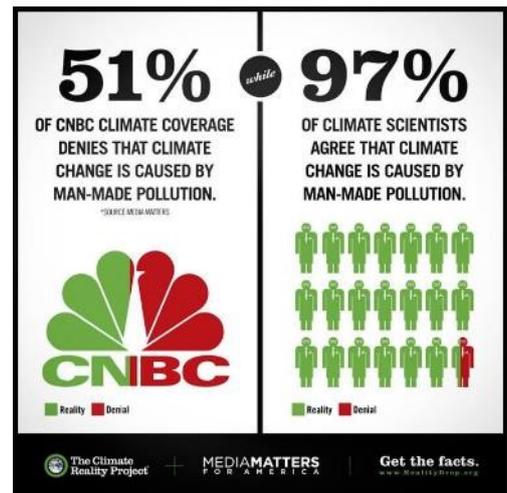
Do we believe the experts?



Michael Gove famously said during the Brexit campaign, “People in this country have had enough of experts.” Mind you, he also said you could count him out of any Conservative leadership contest! To be fair, he was just talking about expert economists “saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong”, and later events showed he had a point.

But what about experts in **science**? Though we may not have quite the same expectation as in the 1960s (I’m old enough to remember Harold Wilson’s “White heat of technology” speech and its impact on the 1964 General Election) that science would solve all our problems, it’s still true that we put huge trust daily in the work of scientists and engineers in our dependence on the technology of transport, computing, communications, health and leisure. We rely on these experts to do their job and give good advice; we don’t stop to question the ability of civil engineers every time we drive across a bridge, though cynics have pointed out that the Titanic was built by experts, and we can all be sceptical about expert pronouncements on health issues such as food, drink and medicines.

So what do we make of scientific expertise on **climate change**? The simple answer is that we probably choose whether to accept the evidence based on what we *want* to believe. The very latest public survey reported by New Scientist magazine in February suggests that 69% of people in the UK *think most scientists say* climate change is real and is mainly the result of human activity. In actual fact, the proportion of scientists with relevant expertise who accept human-induced climate change is about 97% – if you had 100 climate scientists in a room, probably only 2 or 3 of them would oppose this. 97% is about the same as the certainty scientists have that smoking can lead to lung cancer, and who argues against that these days?



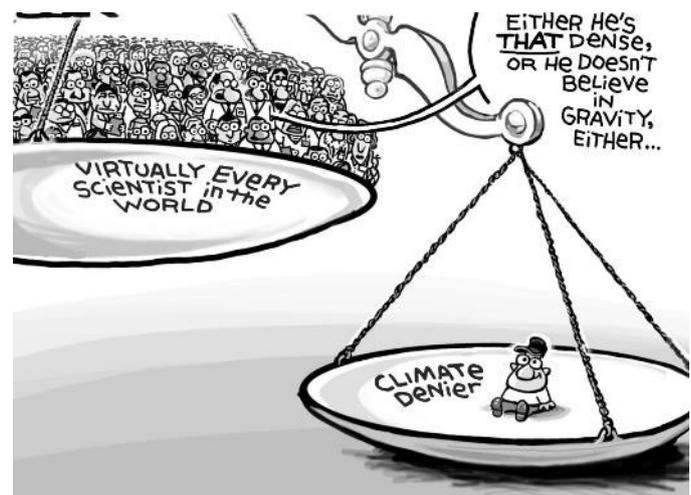
That 69% survey result means that about 30% of people don’t actually *know* (or claim not to know) what the scientific experts say. Interestingly, that’s roughly the same as the proportion of people who *themselves* deny the reality of climate change resulting from human action. 64% personally *agree* with the almost unanimous scientific opinion, up from 59% in 2015. (This is for the UK; the illustration about CNBC coverage relates to the USA, where climate change denial is even higher.)



Why is there this mismatch between public and expert opinion, albeit with a gradually reducing gap? Among the reasons are (1) the way the media tend to present opposing views as if they had equal weight (the same happened in the MMR vaccine and autism controversy some years ago); (2) the powerful voices of those with vested interests opposed to the steps we need to take to tackle the problem; and (3) the short-term horizons of some politicians. Thankfully, despite the climate change scepticism expressed by Donald Trump, and his removal of all relevant data from the White House website – the so-called Control-Alt-Delete approach – you can still see the scientific facts on the websites of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and NASA.



And it isn't just the scientific experts who are warning us. Ten years ago the authoritative Stern Review demonstrated that there are compelling *economic* reasons to take climate change seriously and do something about it. Lord Nicholas Stern, one of the world's leading economists and with rather more credibility than Michael Gove, recently gave a public lecture at Newcastle University, saying that nothing in the last 10 years has seriously argued against this, and the need for action is now greater than ever.



This isn't the place to present the scientific evidence. If you're interested in important topical science-related issues such as this, watch out for a series of expert talks I'm arranging in the Tyne Valley during 2017. These talks, with opportunity for questions and discussion, have been funded by an international charity and are open to all without charge; details will follow when the plans are finalised. You'll see them in the *Tyne Valley Express*! I look forward to seeing some of you.

Bill Clegg

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