

**TITLE: The rise of the climate sceptics**

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**PUBLICATION: Crikey**

**PUBLICATION DATE: 6/08/12**

**LINK: <http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/08/06/green-groups-cop-blame-for-sceptics-rise/>**

It is rare to read about the dangers of fluoride in the opinion pages of Australia's mainstream newspapers, even though a small group of "fluoride sceptics" are convinced of the dangers to our health.

It is also rare to hear about the Rothschild banking conspiracy on radio, even though a committed group of people around the world have collected a wide range of "evidence" to support their view that the Rothschild family controls the world economy through strategic appointments to central banks.

But when it comes to climate science, however, the sceptics have done a great job of establishing doubt in the public mind, and an even better job of propagating their minority views in mainstream newspapers.

In his recent essay for The Monthly, Robert Manne provides a comprehensive account of the players, the tactics, and the timelines involved in shifting the political debate about climate change away from a heavy reliance on advice from organisations such as CSIRO and NASA and towards the views of individual bloggers and radio personalities.

Manne highlights the similarities between the strategies employed by the fossil-fuel industry in recent times and the tobacco industry 50 years ago. Both saw the creation of doubt as their product, and both have made a lot of money selling it. And while it is important to understand how they do it, for me, the question is: why do so many people buy it?

The environment movement in Australia failed spectacularly in its efforts to counter the climate sceptics. The decision to "starve them of oxygen" by refusing to engage was clearly unsuccessful. And the decision to focus instead on selling the details of a compromised policy response rather than selling the urgency of the need to act on climate change left the sceptics virtually free to roam uncontested across the Australian political landscape.

Many have argued that it is impossible to win a debate with climate sceptics. Any attempt, we are told, simply gives them a new forum to distribute their views. But the sceptics clearly didn't need the involvement of the environment movement to make their voices heard.

The main problem appears to be that many of the non-scientists in the environment movement did a bad job of sounding like authoritative scientific voices. This was compounded by the fact that many of the authoritative climate science voices were unprepared for the personal and political vitriol that the sceptics were willing to throw at them.

But just because you are losing a fight doesn't mean it can't be won. Rather, it might mean you need to change strategy, tactics, personnel, or all of the above.

The strategic error that continues to haunt the environment movement is the decision to counter the sceptics' message of "doubt" with a message of "certainty". Such an approach was neither intellectually honest nor politically effective. It ignored the inconvenient truth that science is never "certain" and it placed the onus on the environment movement to have all of the answers, to all of the questions that the climate sceptics could think up. If you have ever seen a scientist try and explain the chronological dispersion of carbon isotopes in a 10-second news grab you will know what I am talking about.

Ironically, if those from the environment movement had themselves embraced the product of doubt they could have taken the sceptics head-on without legitimising the sceptics' often bizarre theories.

As Manne makes clear, the fossil fuel industry has spent a small fortune funding climate sceptics, yet those same sceptics succeeded, in the minds of many, in casting doubt on the independence of government-funded scientists. The environment groups should have focused on creating doubt about the independence of the sceptics.

Similarly, the reason that the sceptics focused on creating doubt is that most people are inherently cautious. That caution should have been the environment movement's strongest asset. Most people insure their homes against the unlikely risk of fire, most people are happy to "waste" money insuring cars they don't crash.

Australians are a conservative people who, if told about the small cost of insuring against a risk, compared with the enormous cost of experiencing the risk, are prone to insure. But instead of working to make the population doubt the motives and credentials of the sceptics, the environment movement instead tried to provide "certainty". What a disaster.

In 2007, John Howard and Kevin Rudd accepted the science of climate change and the need to introduce an emissions trading scheme. Since then, the debate has gone backwards fast. Manne's article provides a unique insight into how the sceptics fought their battle, but the examination of how the environment movement lost theirs is yet to be told.

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