Getting to Grips with Climate Denialism

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Written by Jonathon Porritt and shared with his kind consent.

I really want to get to grips with this whole story about ‘climate denialism’ – a catch-all description that can be applied both to individual ‘denialists’ and the much broader, societal phenomenon of significant elements in politics and the media refusing to accept that today’s global warming is being driven primarily by the emission of greenhouse gases from the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation.

I recently found myself on the receiving end of quite hostile comments from colleagues for continuing to use the language of denialism – and for refusing to accept (as they themselves seem to have done) that the continuing use of a denialist trope has contributed to that sense of alienation and deep anger on the part of so many of those who’ve just administered seriously damaging pain on the political establishments of the US and the UK – the so-called ‘left behind’.

Indeed, some climate campaigners are now whipping themselves into a frenzy of guilt, like so many flagellant penitents, for having appeared superior, condescending and insensitive in describing those who deny the irrefutable science of climate change as ‘ignorant denialists’.

So am I wrong to think that this is just crass – a post-hoc, intellectually defective way of trying to account for something that is much more complex, and which will certainly

not be sorted out by a few climate activists modulating their denialist language in a rather sad endeavour to become more inclusive and politically correct?

I feel so strongly about this because, in reality, it has little if anything to do with the science. In an interesting blog on this very phenomenon, Richard Somerville (Emeritus Professor at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography) put his finger on the real problem:

"For many sceptics or contrarians, the climate change issue is not a science topic at all – it is simply an opportunity for the government, and liberals and environmentalists, to make rules and regulations, to interfere with markets, and to diminish the personal freedom of individuals. It is just one more way for the authority of the state to control the lives of citizens. This view has nothing to do with science, and no argument based on only on science can change it."

Which tells us what we already really know: this is all about politics and values. Thinking about this from the perspective of a typical contrarian, Somerville goes on to say:

"Attacking climate science and scientists is simply a disguise for what concerns him, which is the prospect of liberals and environmentalists dominating policy, and of a government spinning out of control, a government that seizes power, limits freedoms, increases taxes, regulates markets, and diminishes prosperity."

In many ways, that's a much harder reality to deal with than the denial of science itself! And the fact that there are now so many millions of values-driven, a-scientific sceptics out there, in the US in particular, means that the demographic dynamics of addressing climate change will never be the same again. Our conscientious, science-based 'call to climate action', studiously evolved over the last 25 years, is now seen by many as a busted flush, an inadvertently elitist and

insensitive ‘grand plan’ that left the ‘left behind’ feeling even more ignored and even more patronised than they already were.

Right-wing populists in both the UK and the USA took full advantage of that. Posturing as ‘tribunes of the people’, they portrayed middle-class climate activism as yet another attack on the working poor, and on all those whose sense of security, community and prosperity has been fundamentally undermined over the last 40 years. The fact that this ‘left-behindness’ is primarily a consequence of the self-same neo-liberal economics that has so richly benefitted Trump and the 1% of the 1% elite matters little in these ‘post-truth’ days.

If anything, we should therefore be whipping ourselves for the careless use of the word ‘ignorant’ rather than for the continuing use of the word ‘denialist’. We should be much more careful to distinguish between those who, **in full command of the science and its potential implications for the future of humankind**, continue to deny that science in public, and those who continue to put their trust in those politicians and commentators simply because they’re the ones they look to as their best hope in such cruel and troubled times, and whose values resonate most closely with theirs.

The former (including denier-in-chief, Donald Trump, and all those former executives in Exxon Mobil who are now being held to account for advising their shareholders that there was no cause for concern over rising emissions of greenhouse gases, even when they knew – categorically – that there was ample cause for concern!) should continue to be called out for what they are: self-serving, ideologically-driven, deeply immoral abusers of people’s trust and of the entire political system.

That ideological rationale becomes clearer and clearer by the day. As Naomi Klein so eloquently argued in ‘This Changes Everything’, we can’t get away from the reality that addressing the challenge of accelerating climate change does

indeed demand concerted government action, from both a regulatory and a fiscal perspective. And we can't get away from the fact that it further demands a pooling of sovereignty to secure international cooperation – precisely those responses which are most inimical to advocates of the 'small state' and of untrammelled market forces.

The vast majority of people who continue to question the scientific consensus about climate change couldn't be further removed from that kind of lying, ideologically-driven distortion of the truth. It makes far more sense to see them as victims of that abuse, not stupid or ignorant, but distressingly vulnerable to a political con-trick of the worst kind.

To make that distinction, empathetically and not patronisingly, between the knowing denialists of today's neo-liberal elites, and the legion of unknowing victims of denial, is now one of the biggest challenges we face.

And for me, the best way of responding to that challenge is to start prioritising what is referred to by climate change campaigners as the idea of a just transition, ensuring that this global, massively complex moving away from fossil fuels into an alternative energy paradigm should not further disadvantage those in already straitened economic circumstances, or those who face significant economic risk as the fossil fuel economy shrinks.

Some of this is already well rehearsed: prioritising the rollout of solar (for instance) in our poorest communities, giving rural communities a direct stake in renewable energy programmes, delivering (finally!) on endless promises to retrofit poor quality housing in both the USA and the UK, creating hundreds of thousands of new jobs in those parts of our economies where no other new jobs are ever likely to materialise.

But we need to go so much further. There are currently 66,000 people employed in coal mining in the US, and possibly up to 150,000 in the wider coal industry, including coal-fired power stations. Every single climate change campaigner in the USA should today be mobilising to ensure that the economic security of every single employee in the coal industry (below a given salary threshold) is fully protected for a given period of time (five years? ten years?) after their jobs disappear. That would be expensive, not completely fair (given the risk to the jobs of millions of other people in fossil-fuel intensive industries), but a substantive and uncompromising commitment to a just transition in practice.

Sir Jonathon Espie Porritt, 2nd Baronet, CBE is a leading British environmentalist and writer. He is known for his advocacy of the Green Party of England and Wales. Porritt frequently contributes to magazines, newspapers and books, and appears on radio and television.