

Matt Ridley

**'I am branded disgraceful, shameful, even scandalous, all for being a lukewarmer'**

Matt Ridley is hounded by both believers and deniers of man-made climate change. Why? Because, as he explains here, he doesn't agree with either argument

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I am a climate lukewarmer. That means I think recent global warming is real, mostly manmade and will continue but I no longer think it is likely to be dangerous and I think its slow and erratic progress so far is what we should expect in the future. That last year was the warmest yet, in some data sets, but only by a smidgen more than 2005, is precisely in line with such lukewarm thinking.

This view annoys some sceptics who think all climate change is natural or imaginary, but it is even more infuriating to most publicly funded scientists and politicians, who insist climate change is a big risk. My middle-of-the-road position is considered not just wrong, but disgraceful, shameful, verging on scandalous. I am subjected to torrents of online abuse for holding it, very little of it from sceptics.

I was even kept off the shortlist for a part-time, unpaid public-sector appointment in a field unrelated to climate because of having this view, or so the headhunter thought. In the climate debate, paying obeisance to scaremongering is about as mandatory for a public appointment, or public funding, as being a Protestant was in 18th-century England.

Friends regularly send me news of blog posts devoted to nothing but analysing my intellectual and personal inadequacies, always in relation to my views on climate. Writing about climate change is a small part of my life but, to judge by some of the stuff that gets written about me, writing about me is a large part of the life of some of the more obsessive climate commentators. It's all a bit strange. Why is this debate so fractious? Rather than attack my arguments, my critics like to attack my motives. I stand accused of "wanting" climate change to be mild because I support free markets or because I receive income indirectly from coal mining in Northumberland. Two surface coal mines (which I do not own), operating without subsidies, do indeed dig coal partly from land that I own. I am paid a fee, as I've repeatedly made known in speeches, books and articles.

I do think that coal, oil and gas have been a good thing so far, by giving us an alternative to felling forests and killing whales, by supplying fertiliser to feed the world, by giving the global poor affordable energy, and so on. But instead of defending the modern coal industry I write and speak extensively in favour of gas, the biggest competitive threat to coal's share of the electricity market. If we can phase out coal without causing too much suffering, then I would not object.

Besides, I could probably earn even more from renewable energy. As a landowner, I am astonished by the generosity of the offers I keep receiving for green-energy subsidies. Wind farm developers in smart suits dangle the prospect of tens of thousands of pounds per turbine on my land - and tens of turbines. A solar developer wrote to me recently saying he could offer more than a million pounds of income over 25 years if I were to cover some particular fields with solar panels. Many big country houses have installed subsidised wood-fired heating to the point where you can hear their Canalettos cracking. I argue against such subsidies, so I don't take them.

I was not always a lukewarmer.

When I first wrote about the threat of global warming more than 26 years ago, as science editor of The Economist, I thought it was a genuinely dangerous threat. Like, for instance, Margaret Thatcher, I accepted the predictions being made at the time that we would see warming of a third or a half a degree (Centigrade) a decade, perhaps more, which would have devastating consequences.

Gradually, I changed my mind. The failure of the atmosphere to warm as rapidly as predicted was a big reason: there has been less than half a degree of global warming in four decades - and it has slowed down, not sped up. Increases in malaria, storms, heatwaves, droughts and floods have not materialised to anything like the predicted extent, if at all. Sea level has risen but at a very slow rate - about a foot per century.

I soon realised that the mathematical models predicting rapid warming assume big amplifying feedbacks in the atmosphere, mainly from water vapour; carbon dioxide is merely the primer, responsible for about a third of the predicted warming. When this penny dropped, so did my confidence in predictions of future alarm: the amplifiers are highly uncertain.

Another thing that gave me pause was that I went back and looked at the history of past predictions of ecological apocalypse from my youth - acid rain, population explosion, oil exhaustion, elephant extinction, rainforest loss, the ozone layer, desertification, nuclear winter, cancerous pesticide pollution, and so forth. There was a consistent pattern of exaggeration, followed by damp squibs: in not a single case was the problem as bad as had been widely predicted. That does not make every new prediction of apocalypse necessarily wrong, of course, but it should encourage scepticism.

What sealed my apostasy from climate alarm was the extraordinary history of the famous "hockey stick" graph, which purported to show that today's temperatures were higher and changing faster than at any time in the past thousand years. That genuinely shocked me when I first saw it and, briefly in the early 2000s, it persuaded me to abandon my growing doubts about dangerous climate change and return to the "alarmed" camp.

Then I began to read the work of two Canadian researchers, Steve McIntyre and Ross McKittrick. They and others have shown, as confirmed by the National Academy of Sciences in the US, that the hockey stick graph, and others like it, are heavily reliant on dubious sets of tree rings and use inappropriate statistical filters that exaggerate any 20th-century upturns.

What shocked me more was the scientific establishment's reaction to this: it tried to pretend that nothing was wrong. And then a flood of emails was leaked in 2009 showing some climate scientists apparently scheming to withhold data, prevent papers being published, get journal editors sacked and evade freedom-of-information requests, much as sceptics had been alleging. That was when I began to re-examine everything I had been told about climate change and, the more I looked, the flakier the prediction of rapid warming seemed.

I am especially unimpressed by the claim that a prediction of rapid and dangerous warming is "settled science", as firm as evolution or gravity. How could it be? It is a prediction! No prediction, let alone in a multi-causal, chaotic and poorly understood system like the global climate, should ever be treated as gospel. With the exception of eclipses, there is virtually nothing scientists can say with certainty about the future. It is absurd to argue that one cannot disagree with a forecast. Is the Bank of England's inflation forecast infallible? Incidentally, my current view is still consistent with the "consensus" among scientists - as represented by reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - which is that climate change is happening, not that it is going to be dangerous. The latest IPCC report gives a range of estimates of future warming, from harmless to terrifying. My guess would be about one degree of warming this century, well within the IPCC's range.

Yet most politicians go straight to the top of the IPCC's range and call climate change things like "perhaps the world's most fearsome weapon of mass destruction" (John Kerry), requiring the expenditure of trillions. I think that is verging on grotesque in a world full of war, hunger and disease. It results in environmental efforts being diverted from more urgent priorities, like habitat loss and invasive species.

The policies proposed to combat climate change, far from being an insurance policy, are ineffective, expensive, harmful to poor people and bad for the environment: we're tearing down rainforests to grow biofuels and ripping up peat bogs to install windmills that need fossil-fuel backup. These policies are failing to buy comfort for our wealthy grandchildren and are doing so on the backs of today's poor. Some insurance policy.

After I came out as a lukewarmer, I would get genuine critiques from scientists who disagreed with me and wanted to exchange views. I had long and time-consuming conversations with several such scientists.

Yet I grew steadily more sceptical as, one by one, they failed to answer my doubts. They often resorted to metaarguments, especially the argument from authority: if the Royal Society says it is alarmed, then you should be. If I want argument from authority, I replied, I will join the Catholic Church. "These are standard denialist talking points" scoffed another prominent scientist, unpersuasively, when I raised objections - as if that answered them.

My experience with sceptical scientists, many of them distinguished climatologists at leading universities, was different. The more I probed, the better their data seemed. They did not resort to the argument from authority.

Sometimes I disagreed with them or thought they went too far. I have yet to be convinced, for example, that changes in the output of the sun caused the warming of the 1980s and 1990s - an idea that some espouse.

So for the most part, I found myself persuaded by the middle-of-the-road, "lukewarm" argument - that CO<sub>2</sub>-induced warming is likely but it won't be large, fast or damaging.

Then a funny thing happened a few years ago. Those who disagreed with me stopped pointing out politely where or why they disagreed and started calling me names. One by one, many of the most prominent people in the climate debate began to throw vitriolic playground abuse at me. I was "paranoid", "specious", "risible", "selfdefaming", "daft", "lying", "irrational", an "idiot". Their letters to the editor or their blog responses asserted that I was "error-riddled" or had seriously misrepresented something, but then they not only failed to substantiate the charge but often roughly confirmed what I had written.

I have seen ill-tempered polarisation of scientific debates before, such as during the nature-nurture debates of the 1970s and 1980s. That debate grew vicious. What caused the polarisation, I realised, was not just that people on one side read the articles they agreed with, reinforcing their prejudices, but that they relied on gross distortions of their enemies' arguments, written by self-appointed guardians of the flame on their own side, so they were constantly attacking straw men.

It's the same here. Most people who attack me seem to think I am a "denier" of climate change because of what a few hyperventilating bloggers keep saying about me. It's not, of course, true. It's these flame guardians who polarise such debates.

The most prolific of them is a man named Bob Ward. Although employed at the London School of Economics, he is not a researcher or lecturer, but policy and communications director, somebody whose day job is to defend the climate orthodoxy in the media. Some might call him a spin doctor.

It appears to me that he feels compelled to write something rude about me every time I publish on this topic and although his letters to editors are often published, he throws an online tantrum if they're not. He's hilariously obsessed with my peerage, lovingly reciting my title every time he attacks me, like a Bertie Woosterish snob.

As an example of playing the man and not the ball, Ward and Lord Deben, chairman of the government's official committee on climate change, are both wont to mock the fact that my Oxford DPhil thesis in 1983 was on birds. Good luck to them but I notice they don't mock the fact that the DPhil thesis of Lord Krebs was also on birds, earned in the very same research group as me: the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology. Lord Krebs is the chairman of the adaptation subcommittee of the committee on climate change.

John Krebs, a fine scientist and superb lecturer, was the internal examiner of my thesis, which he praised at the time, after telling me to correct a couple of silly mistakes he had spotted in the calculation of a probability result. I did so. Imagine my surprise when he recently told several separate people (who reported it to me) that I should not be listened to on climate change because my DPhil thesis, all those years ago, contained mathematical errors.

Lord May even used this argument against me in a debate in the House of Lords: that because I got a number wrong in a calculation 31 years ago, I cannot ever be right again. This is the kind of hilarious thing that happens to you if you come out as a lukewarmer.

Talking of the committee on climate change, last year Lord Deben commissioned an entire report to criticise something I had said. Among other howlers, it included a quotation from the IPCC but the quote had a large chunk cut from the middle. When restored, the line supported me, not Lord Deben.

When I pointed this out politely to Lord Deben, he refused to restore the excision and left the document unchanged on the committee's website. Presenting quotations so they appear to mean something different from what they do is quite a sin in journalism. Apparently not in Whitehall committees.

I suppose all this fury means my arguments are hitting home. If they were easily demolished my critics would demolish them rather than try to demolish me. Many things that I was abused for saying have since proved to be right. I was one of the first to argue in mainstream media (The Wall Street Journal in 2012) that data supported much lower estimates of climate sensitivity (the amount of warming induced by a doubling of carbon dioxide levels) than those assumed by the models used by the IPCC.

This produced the usual vituperation online from about a dozen high-profile science commentators. Since then four papers have appeared in the scientific literature giving low estimates of climate sensitivity, some even lower than I had said. I am waiting for my critics to acknowledge this.

I have never met a climate sceptic, let alone a lukewarmer, who wants his opponents silenced. I wish I could say the same of those who think climate change is an alarming prospect.