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Scientific debate about climate change has been silenced

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Climate change policy should be informed by a sober assessment of the data and ultimately determined by the people's representatives, weighing up the costs against the impact any policy is likely to deliver.

That is why it is so disturbing that there is a campaign by the political class, entrenched academia and professional activists to silence scientific debate about climate change.

This is an expression of political power in service of a mythical consensus, the assertion of which threatens the scientific method and the fundamental right to freedom of speech. At its worst, the campaign against climate change debate is nothing less than an abuse of office.

In the United States and elsewhere, legal officers and elected officials have sought to use the authority of their offices to harass and silence private citizens who disagree with their preferred climate change policies.

In November 2015, for example, New York Attorney-General Eric Schneiderman subpoenaed ExxonMobil, seeking documents that might show the company had downplayed the risk that climate change might pose to future profits, misleading its shareholders.

This action was justified by changes in ExxonMobil's public position on climate change since the 1980s. The subpoena (and intention to prosecute) indicated that the state of New York considers climate change scepticism to be dishonest, that it is not possible to disagree on climate change in good faith.

This bullying certitude is extended to groups that support the position of resource companies.

As evidence for his accusation of bad faith against those companies, Schneiderman pointed to the work of a number of free-market think tanks, including the American Enterprise Institute and the American Legislative Exchange Council.

At the federal level, in July 2016 Senate Democrats sent letters to 22 think tanks demanding they disclose the identities of their donors because of their "campaign to deceive and mislead ... about the scientific consensus surrounding climate change".

Cato Institute president John Allison rightly called this action "an obvious attempt to chill research into funding of public policy projects (the senators) don't like".

The message was clear: how private organisations spend their resources, and how they express and develop their ideas, are matters for the state. The state does not have any concern for the wellbeing of shareholders — who, after all, continue to see good returns on their investments. Instead, it cares only that a company the size of ExxonMobil has the power to influence the public debate in a way that conflicts with the state's own priorities.

This determination to intimidate dissenters is not a purely American phenomenon. On September 27, 2006, then-member for Wills, Kelvin Thomson of the Australian Labor Party, sent a letter to a number of companies demanding to know whether they had given financial support to the Institute of Public Affairs or “any other body which spreads misinformation or undermines the scientific consensus concerning global warming” and further demanding that if they had given that support that they cease to do so.

A member of parliament has no more right to know this information, much less to make this demand, than any other citizen. And yet the demand, outrageous on its face, came under colour of authority. Arguably this was a worse use of Mr Thomson's letterhead than the reference he wrote for Tony Mokbel.

Depressingly, this campaign of intimidation has been supported by academia and the media. In September 2015, 20 scientists wrote to President Obama demanding his administration bring anti-corruption charges against “deniers” in the resource industry.

And academics have argued variously that climate change scepticism is “fraud”, “criminally negligent” and not a form of free speech because it is “insincere”. One Australian media commentator has argued that it is “epistemologically disingenuous” to always insist on the right of alternative opinions to be heard.

In addition, public platforms are denied to climate change dissenters, no matter their credentials. In 2015 Danish statistician Bjorn Lomborg agreed to move his research centre to the University of Western Australia. But under pressure from academic staff and student activists, the university's vice-chancellor reneged on the deal. Subsequent discussions with Flinders University floundered immediately as staff and students reacted angrily to the idea that someone might ever produce research they disagreed with.

The elite cabal of scientists who dominate climate change research have been militant in shunning those with whom they disagree. Moreover, a lack of respect taints the entire public discussion of climate change.

Proponents of climate change action routinely use the word “denier” to describe climate change sceptics, with the word having been deliberately chosen to invoke a parallel with Holocaust denial.

All of this contributes to a powerful chilling effect that, in concert with the state's campaign of harassment, discourages dissenters from voicing their opinions. Freedom of speech is not only valuable in and of itself, it has instrumental value as well. It is only through the contest of ideas that the truth may be apprehended.

In science as in politics and all other fields of human endeavour, dissent has the virtue of testing the prevailing arguments, which either fail and fall or survive yet stronger. The peremptory shutting down of debate short-circuits this process. Far from ensuring evidence-based policy prevails, the campaign against climate change free speech endangers scientific research and argument.

It sets a terrifying precedent for the abuse of power to shut down policy debate and should alarm citizens and policymakers alike.