

# PROVIDENCE Journal

## Whitehouse threatens scientific freedom

By Chip Knappenberger

March 24, 2015

Science is impossible without differing opinions. At the root of many of history's scientific regressions are attempts by powerful people to silence minority opinions.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., has been sending letters to select energy companies, trade groups and think tanks to try to intimidate them into divulging the details of funding they may provide for climate change research activities. In a March 15 letter to editor ("Scientists' may be engaged in fraud against public"), he dismissed the idea that this undermines scientific freedom.

He suggests the Cato Institute's right to privacy is nefarious and that Cato's funding, 95 percent of which comes from non-corporate donors, has turned me into a climate denier. His insinuation is demonstrably false in several ways.

As a climatologist who has researched climate change, its causes, and its impacts for nearly three decades, I can say quite confidently I don't "deny" climate change. In fact, Mr. Whitehouse and I probably are in much closer agreement on the climate science than the senator realizes — or perhaps, cares to admit.

Mr. Whitehouse, who has made a name for himself on this issue by delivering weekly speeches on the topic from the Senate floor for the past three years, has said, "The atmosphere is warming; ice is melting; seas are warming, rising and acidifying." I completely agree with this assessment. I also agree human emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouses gases — largely a result of humanity's quest for accessible energy — play a significant role in these changes. In fact, there is consensus on these views, as Mr. Whitehouse frequently notes.

The level of agreement diverges, however, as we go from generalities to specifics. For example, Mr. Whitehouse confidently ascribes changes in frequency and ferocity of extreme weather events to human-caused climate changes, while the scientific literature is much more nuanced. The scientific consensus, such as that presented by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, holds that links between the occurrence of most types of extreme weather events and climate change are neither well-established nor well-supported. I stand close to the scientific majority on this issue, but apart from Mr. Whitehouse.

The biggest difference, however, between Mr. Whitehouse and me -- and likely all the climate scientists whom Mr. Whitehouse decorates with derogatory terms and whom the senator seeks to intimidate -- is in our preferred policy response.

Mr. Whitehouse is very vocal in his support for legislation aimed at severely restricting emissions of carbon dioxide by placing a price on carbon. Climate change doesn't call for strong-handed government-led tactics that may hamper our economy, risk the supply and reliability of our energy production, and dampen the pace of human-betterment in developing countries around the world.

In fact, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's own models, these types of efforts do nothing to demonstrably improve the climate. For me, free market-led adaptation to changing climate conditions, regardless of cause, is an approach much more likely to produce manifold and tangible positive outcomes.

It is these differences — in policy, not science — that are at the heart of Mr. Whitehouse's investigation. But whereas Mr. Whitehouse has failed to persuade Congress to tax carbon, his one-sided investigation helps derail scientific advancement, turn off those who would study science as a way of improving their society, and decrease already low opinions many hold of our federal legislators.

Woe be it for a climate scientist dependent on federal monies to report results that run contrary to the underpinnings of the administration's Climate Action Plan. Future funding and career advancement are jeopardized. Consequently, such results don't find their way into the scientific knowledge base. When this happens repeatedly, science proceeds in the wrong direction and may become misleading, even dangerous. This can happen when scientific funding is monopolized through the federal government. Senator Whitehouse's investigations are an attempt to further consolidate federal control over climate science by demonizing funding from non-government sources.

Despite Mr. Whitehouse's protestations, scientific freedom is the issue here. While impinging on it may provide a shortcut to Mr. Whitehouse's political goals, it threatens to significantly set back science and society. This behavior should thus be vehemently opposed.

*Chip Knappenberger is the assistant director of the Center for the Study of Science at the Cato Institute.*