

NATIONAL OBSERVER

Why did the Globe and Mail portray a climate denier as a coronavirus expert?

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The Globe and Mail is Canada's most well-regarded establishment newspaper (I've written for its business magazine since the late 1980s). So it was shocking to see it run an op-ed piece on Monday promoting a highly controversial approach to dealing with the coronavirus pandemic – written by a well-known climate change denialist who has no academic credentials and a history of distorting the truth.

Entitled “Britain’s novel approach to coronavirus: Will herd immunity work?”, Lawrence Solomon promoted the Boris Johnson government’s erstwhile position - since disavowed - that, with the exception of people showing underlying conditions and those over age 70, no one should take any preventative measures to being exposed to COVID-19.

Wrote Solomon: “In the meantime, the healthy population whose immune systems are up to the task... will fight off COVID-19 on their own, and it often won’t be much of a fight ‘because the vast majority of people get a mild illness [after which] people are immune to this disease and we reduce the transmission, at the same time we protect those who are most vulnerable to it,’ Dr. (Patrick) Vallance, (Britain’s chief scientific adviser) explained.”

Solomon claims that unnamed British virologists support this approach and “characterize the measures adopted by other countries as shortsighted, extreme and have the potential to backfire.”

The position embraced by Solomon is known as “herd immunity”.

The reasoning is that with a highly contagious virus like COVID-19, there’s really no point in preventing people from being exposed to it. After all, we’re all likely to be exposed to it eventually. We might as well allow exposure to occur so our bodies can develop antibodies and become immune – the way they do when we get a vaccine. And most people will only get mildly ill.

Solomon acknowledges this position has been widely condemned.

Herd immunity would overload health care systems

In fact, many highly-regarded virologists have shot down this approach entirely, with even the UK’s Secretary of Health, Matt Hancock, saying: “Herd immunity is not our policy. It is not our goal.”

Moreover, as Harvard University professor of epidemiology and expert on infectious diseases, William Hanage, noted in the Guardian on Sunday: “When I first heard about this, I could not believe it” thinking the reports of the Johnson government’s position were “satire”.

Hanage cited all the reasons the herd immunity position is idiotic: that unlike getting a vaccine, a pandemic means a very large number of people are suddenly exposed to a virus, which will make a very large number of people sick, with some dying.

Why did the Globe and Mail allow Solomon to promote reckless views about coronavirus? And who is Solomon and what are his credentials?

“Even though the mortality rate is likely quite low, a small fraction of a very large number is still a large number. And the mortality rate will climb when the (National Health Service) is overwhelmed. This would be expected to happen, even if we make the generous assumption that the government were entirely successful in restricting the virus to the low-risk population, at the peak of the outbreak the numbers requiring critical care would be greater than the number of beds available. This is made worse by the fact that people who are badly ill tend to remain so for a long time, which increases the burden.”

In short, when health care systems become overburdened due to too many sick people – as they have in Iran, Italy, Spain and soon the US – they break down and people die who otherwise might not have to.

“You should instead look to the example of South Korea, which, through a combination of intense surveillance and social distancing, appears to have gained some semblance of control over the virus,” wrote Hanage. “Policy should be directed at slowing the outbreak to a (more) manageable rate” – including adopting methods now being employed, like social distancing and staying at home.

Solomon has no academic credentials and dismisses dangers of global warming

So why did the Globe and Mail allow Solomon to promote such reckless views? And who is Solomon and what are his credentials?

To anyone who’s been reading the op-ed pages of The Financial Post, Solomon is well known – he writes a weekly column for the business paper. Yet, despite claiming he is “one of Canada’s leading environmentalists”, Solomon is most famous for opposing climate change measures (Solomon does not deny global warming is occurring, but sees it as a positive thing and is opposed to any efforts to curb emissions).

Solomon appears to have absolutely no academic credentials whatsoever – notably in the sciences, ecology or climate change. In one profile of him by a Western Canada think tank (that denies climate change), he was quoted as saying: “I have no academic background,” and is self-educated.

Solomon is most closely linked with Energy Probe Research Foundation, which is famous for believing most claims about climate change are fraudulent and therefore advocates against measures to fight global warming. Back in the 1980s and early ‘90s, Energy Probe had a decent reputation for its work, including warning about global warming, criticizing the economics of nuclear power and pushing for conservation. But Probe has since gone into decline and increasingly became a vehicle for Solomon’s brand of free market

environmentalism. Nowadays he is also policy director of something called the Consumer Policy Institute which, according to its website, has one employee – Solomon.

Moreover, he has bruited some peculiar ideas over the years.

For example, in 2008, in an interview in the conservative National Review, Solomon argued that the Kyoto Protocol, designed to curb global emissions, “has emerged as the single biggest threat to the global environment.” He claimed that Kyoto was harming developing countries, leading to the revival of megadams and nuclear power, seeing food lands turned into fuel land and to “people in the Third World rioting because they can’t afford the doubling of grain prices that has resulted.”

Two years ago, in the Post, he cheered Donald Trump’s announcement of stopping funding global warming programs: “With Trump and other Western countries shutting the door on more climate funding, and with the public fatigued by decades of prophesies of doom, the global warming era is coming to a close.”

In a 2017 column, entitled “Calling out climate lies”, Solomon wrote: “None of the billions spent on (climate) research amounted to anything – none of the models proved reliable, none of the predictions were borne out, none of the expected effects materialized. The Arctic ice cap hasn’t disappeared, polar bear populations haven’t declined, hurricanes haven’t become more common, malaria hasn’t spread, temperatures haven’t continued to climb. What did materialize was fraud after fraud.”

That same year, he wrote a column called “Ban the Bike! How cities made a huge mistake in promoting cycling” in which he argued: “In many cities, bike lanes now consume more road space than they free up, they add to pollution as well as reducing it, they hurt neighbourhoods and business districts alike, and they have become a drain on the public purse. The bicycle today — or rather the infrastructure that now supports it — exemplifies ‘inappropriate technology,’ a good idea gone wrong through unsustainable, willy-nilly top-down planning.”

But controversy about whether Solomon ignores or manipulates evidence has long dogged him.

Solomon misrepresented views of prominent astrophysicist

In 2007, he dedicated a column in the National Post to Cambridge University astrophysicist and expert on solar magnetic fields, Dr. Nigel Weiss, claiming that Weiss felt “that the science (on climate change) is anything but settled... except for one virtual certainty: the world is about to enter a cooling period”.

Weiss responded immediately, saying: “The article by Lawrence Solomon, which portrays me as a denier of global warming, is a slanderous fabrication. I have always maintained that the current episode of warming that we are experiencing is caused by anthropogenic greenhouse gases, and that global temperatures will rise much further unless steps are taken to halt the burning of fossil fuel”. His rebuttal was accompanied by an official press release from the University of Cambridge that also rebutted Solomon’s claims about Weiss. The Post eventually printed an apology after Weiss threatened to sue for defamation.

In 2008, Solomon published a book called “The Deniers”, which was about the “world-renowned” scientists “who stood up against global warming hysteria, political persecution, and

fraud.” The book profiled 28 scientists whose work purportedly undermined the case that humanity is heating up the world to a destructive degree.

Yet many of the scientists he profiled in such glowing terms either agreed that global warming was occurring but disagreed to what effect, or had taken money from the oil industry.

One was Richard Lindzen, a retired MIT atmospheric physicist, who has been a paid consultant to the coal industry (having pocketed \$30,000 from Peabody Coal to give testimony before a state commission) and was on staff at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that has received large sums from the Koch brothers. Lindzen has praised ExxonMobil and appeared in “The Great Global Warming Swindle”, a notorious British documentary that was dismissed by the UK’s Royal Society.

Solomon has also defended Fred Singer, a physicist linked to a string of oil and coal industry lobby groups and who long operated as a hired gun for the tobacco industry giving ‘expert’ testimony that second hand smoking is not dangerous.

In short, Solomon’s lack of scientific credentials and long history of ignoring well-established science is staggering. So why then did the Globe and Mail see fit to publish his latest cockamamie idea – which may encourage people to take heedless risks with their lives?

But he has been doing this for decades with climate change – denying it poses a threat as the planet burns (notably Australia and California this past year).