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In Las Vegas, Climate Change Deniers Regroup, Vow to Keep Doubt Alive

By Abe Streep July 10, 2014

Earlier this week, the Heartland Institute convened its Ninth International Climate Change Conference in Las Vegas. A nonprofit, free-market think tank in Chicago with a \$6 million annual budget, Heartland has been hosting conferences since 2008 for those dubious of the science confirming human-caused climate change. It is called the ICCC for short, the acronym an intentional echo of the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an international body that has published the most comprehensive studies of global warming. The ICCC, not IPCC, conference has been held in New York, Munich, and Chicago. This year's kicked off with a dinner for roughly 600 in the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino, the top floors of which were decorated with a glinting advertisement for a Michael Jackson reenactment show.

“The headline is probably going to be, ‘Coal Industry Funds Denier Conference in Boiling Hot Las Vegas,’” Heartland President Joseph Bast said during his opening address as the lemon chicken was cleared. Near the ICCC registration table a sign thanked a long list of co-sponsors, among them the Australian Taxpayer’s Alliance, the Ayn Rand Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and the Illinois Coal Association, which, according to Heartland, donated a mere \$150 to the conference. His joke was clearly a preemptive jab at any reporter tempted to cite Vegas’s triple-digit heat and the ICCC’s fossil-fuel sponsors in the same sentence.

Bast’s manner is severe and understated. Once a favorite bogeyman of environmentalists, he and Heartland have recently slipped from mainstream relevance as more and more corporations—including former funders such as Exxon Mobil (XOM)—have reluctantly accepted climate change as a political reality, even if their executives still raise doubts about the extent of industry’s role in causing it. In his speech, Bast argued that Heartland does not promote denial of a changing climate, but rather skepticism of the scientific consensus that anthropogenic (man-made) global warming is a grave threat to the planet. Heartland sees this global consensus as alarmist and crippling for the economy, especially given that, as Bast claimed, “The data don’t show any warming for the last 17 years.”

During Bast's remarks, I ate with Pat Garofalo, a Republican state congressman from Minnesota who was at the conference to moderate a panel titled "Global Warming as a Social Movement." He made news last year for an insensitive tweet about NBA players, but he has also crossed the aisle on such issues as gay marriage (he's for it) and wind energy (for that, too). He's now GOP lead on the Minnesota House Energy Policy committee and advocates development of all kinds of energy, though he's against solar, which he deems inefficient.

During dinner Garofalo was extremely friendly and rattled off a series of well-researched stats about how well Minnesota is doing with both gas and renewables. "The fracking thing is so good for America," he says. He's opposed to the new EPA regulations, which would, he said, require his home state to reduce emissions by an untenable 41 percent by 2030, compared with just 11 percent for gas-heavy North Dakota. His ties to Heartland seemed pretty loose: He has published one antisolar op-ed on the group's website but told me his role at the conference was to facilitate smart conversation. "If someone says something that's BS, I call them on it," he said.

Joining us were a young Heartland staffer, a retired couple from San Antonio, and a thin Canadian named Gerry McGuire, who runs a limousine company. He wore all black and a feather in his hat. A pin on his lapel read BE EXCELLENT TO EACH OTHER. He once ran for mayor in left-leaning Vancouver, an experience that taught him "what a pancake feels like." Behind us sat a big, goateed guy who looked vaguely familiar. It took a moment to place him: Calvin Beisner, the head of the evangelical Cornwall Alliance, who, in 2012, suggested on Christian television that Hurricane Sandy was "a little taste" of God's vengeance. He'd come to receive an award for Outstanding Spokesperson on Faith, Science, & Stewardship. Beisner fit right in: The vast majority in the room were white men in their fifties.

Despite Bast's distinction between denial and skepticism, the next speaker, meteorologist and amateur bodybuilder Joe Bastardi, touched the hem of full-blown denial. Bastardi is big—a nickname, in fact, is Big Joe Bastardi—with a military-grade crewcut and a New Jersey accent. He blitzed through a PowerPoint presentation outlining a couple of the more popular Heartland talking points: The earth is experiencing a cooling period, thanks in part to the Pacific Decadal Oscillation, or PDO, a periodic, long-term El Nino-like effect in the Pacific Ocean; Antarctic sea ice is increasing; and "even Arctic ice extent is heading above normal." (Recent data from NASA suggests otherwise.)

Bastardi cracked a few leaden jokes (to stop hurricanes, he suggested that we should "just change the name to 'himricanes,' then none of them [would] get past the Virgin Islands"), skewered Bruce Springsteen for his hypocrisy in turning from a Pink Cadillac man to a climate hawk ("he made all that money with all those gas guzzling cars in his songs"), and, toward the end of his speech, compared certain alarmist statements unfavorably with the assertion that "Elvis ... might be alive." He received spirited applause.

As did Willie Soon, a Malaysian American physicist at the Harvard-Smithsonian institute for astrophysics who advocates a theory that the sun causes natural warming cycles. A darling of climate skeptics, Soon, 48, has received significant funding from such groups as the American Petroleum Institute. After Soon was done, the British writer and novelist James Delingpole took the stage and hollered, “Good evening, fellow evil climate change deniers. How are you enjoying Vegas? This is the sort of the heart of evil—or should I say, the heartland of evil?” Everyone laughed. He made a crack about England being ousted by “cheating foreigners” in the World Cup. Then he stopped joking. “I think that one thing we are inclined to forget,” he said, “in our righteousness and decency and goodness, is that we are actually fighting a war here.” The laughs turned to applause. “It is a war, ultimately, for Western civilization. For freedom.”

It was time now for the show-stopper. A thin, twenty-something Austrian man named Kilez More took the stage in crisp jeans, white sneakers, and a necklace. He started to rap. A projector aired a YouTube (GOOG) video with subtitles. The chorus of the song went like this:

Story: Google's Sundar Pichai Is the Most Powerful Man in Mobile

“Climate change was not made by man! No!
It’s only to keep the world in fear
But I don’t believe it and so I’m getting labeled sick.
But that’s the price you pay when you think for yourself.”

More stalked the stage and held the microphone in one hand, his other arm gesticulating outward. His cadence was actually pretty good, the beat catchy. In the crowd, feet began to tap, but arms and butts stayed down.

Despite Bast’s triumphalism, Heartland does not appear on an upswing. In February 2012, on the heels of a much-discussed and highly critical think piece on the institute by Naomi Klein, a scientist named Peter Gleick obtained and released a series of documents listing Heartland’s funders, which included the Koch Foundation, the General Motors Foundation, and drinks giant Diageo (DEO), which owns Guinness, Johnnie Walker, and Smirnoff. Gleick and Heartland then waged a public war over whether he’d forged some of the documents. Heartland insisted that he had, while Gleick claimed he’d just misrepresented himself to gain access to them. Lawsuits were threatened, then fizzled. Neither side came out looking very good.

A few months later, in May 2012, Bast and company erected a billboard to promote its Chicago conference: a photo of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski that read, “I STILL BELIEVE IN GLOBAL WARMING. DO YOU?” The fallout was swift. State Farm Insurance and Diageo, among others, dropped their funding, and one of Heartland’s more prominent members, Eli Lehrer, a free-market advocate and insurance specialist who now says he thinks “climate change is real as a problem,” left to start his own Washington (D.C.) think tank. Heartland removed the billboard.

But at least attention was being paid. Heartland has spent much of the time since preparing a report called *Climate Change Reconsidered*, which it released this April at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Turnout was minimal, the event cut short when multiple reporters asked why much of the science cited within came from the 1970s. These days, Heartland finds itself a step behind most of the businesses it used to cultivate. Most businesses have move past denial to focus on mitigation and adaptation.

Adaptation was not on the agenda at the Mandalay. Panels included “Costs and Benefits of Renewable Energy,” which gave exactly zero airtime to benefits. In a panel on “Carbon Taxes and the Social Cost of Carbon,” much of which was devoted to the recent EPA regulations, Competitive Enterprise Institute Senior Fellow Marlo Lewis Jr. railed against any sort of pricing on emissions. He also posted a list of names of Republicans who were hurting the cause by advocating a carbon tax. (Lehrer, the defected Heartland lobbyist, was among them.) Lewis said that a carbon tax would “create a new welfare scheme.” His goal was to get rid of the EPA regulations, which he called “an affront to the constitution,” and to “throw the bums out in 2014 and 2016. That’s our plan. It’s a victory plan.”

In the halls, a spirit of reunion predominated. Bast could be seen speaking privately with Don Blankenship, the disgraced former chief executive of Massey Energy, the coal giant that’s since been bought out. Elsewhere, British politician Christopher Monckton, a prominent skeptic, gave a TV interview. I tracked down Heartland senior fellow James M. Taylor. Asked how the group had fared since 2012, he replied, “My general impression is that our funding is as strong as ever.” Any regrets about the billboard? “It’s real interesting,” he said, “because for many years I and many others have pointed out when alarmists would compare skeptics to Holocaust deniers, to mass murderers. ... I find it ironic that the same folks who set up those ground rules now get upset.” What energy sources did he believe the U.S. should invest in? He said he’d bet on gas, but that was because government was imposing draconian restrictions on coal, which he thought was perhaps the cleanest source out there. How, I asked, was coal cleaner than solar? He referred to the amount of water that solar thermal power required. “It’s land-intensive, it’s water-intensive,” he said.

Heartland’s strategy seemed to be to throw many theories at the wall and see what stuck. Patrick Moore, a Greenpeace co-founder from Canada who has become a prominent nuclear energy advocate and environmental contrarian, said that the Athabasca oil sands in Alberta had been “denigrated and demonized.” Within the context of Canada’s massive boreal forest, he said, they were akin to “a pimple on an elephant.”

Some thought the earth is heating up, but only by an incremental amount. Some thought this change was caused by the sun. Some thought it was caused by the Pacific Decadal Oscillation. Some said the earth was cooling. Many pointed out that Germany, often held up by renewable energy advocates as a model for a new paradigm, is turning on coal-fired power plants to back up its wind energy, which is true. If there was a single agenda that emerged from the IPCC, it seemed to be the need to revoke the EPA regulations. But there was one other unifying thread: Al Gore.

After a while, I started to count the time between Gore jokes. It rarely took more than a minute or two before one punctuated the swirl of opaque and occasionally conflicting scientific theories. The Cato Institute's Pat Michaels; Weather Channel co-founder John Coleman; Moore—they all ripped on Gore. It was a bit like being stuck in 2007.

One of Heartland's first and most prominent campaigns was against tobacco regulation, and it was all about creating a seed of doubt. In the 1990s, Bast wrote columns titled "Joe Camel Is Innocent" and "Five Lies About Tobacco." (You can see him here looking uncomfortable and hedging to a confrontational reporter on the issue of whether one or seven cigarettes a day is safe.)

As Bast did with tobacco, he seems to be more certain of his views the more wrong he's accused of being. At the Mandalay, there was a palpable feeling of disbelief that things had gone so awry that the rest of the world had lost its mind. "How did we get into this awful spot today?" asked Weather Channel's Coleman. The prevailing sentiment was that the only decent, nonbiased climatologists on earth were here in the building. "We're not attacking science," Taylor said onstage. "We're practicing it." I heard David and Goliath referred to, as well as Copernicus. It seemed either quite cynical or quite lonely. I asked Gerry McGuire, the Canadian limo driver who'd run for mayor of Vancouver, if he had a community of like-minded people at home. "No," he said. "It's like being on an island. That's why I come here."