

The Times has fallen for an unfounded climate change conspiracy theory

Who needs scientific evidence on climate change when you can distract the world with shiny new conspiracies?

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Here we go again. [The latest IPCC report](#), the US [National Climate Assessment report](#), and a [report published by US military researchers](#) all recently warned us yet again about [the risks](#) associated with human-caused climate change. While [the planet continues to warm](#), [ice continues to melt](#), and [sea levels continue to rise](#), the conservative media are trying to distract everyone from these scientific realities with a shiny quarter named Lennart Bengtsson.

Bengtsson is a meteorologist at the University of Reading, who recently decided to join a charity, the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF). The GWPF is known for downplaying the risks posed by human-caused global warming with [shoddy scientific arguments](#), then arguing against taking any meaningful action to address the problem.

The GWPF has called the IPCC a "deeply discredited organisation" [and worse](#), and [has accused climate scientists of being delusional or liars](#). The group also recently [set up a new campaigning arm](#), which would be free from charity regulations requiring that any information they put out is fair and as accurate as possible.

Thus it was not surprising when Bengtsson's scientific colleagues were unhappy with him joining this organization. Some of those colleagues allegedly told Bengtsson that they did not want to publish research with him due to his association with this political group, which seems entirely understandable. However, in response to these alleged reactions from his colleagues (Bengtsson did not respond to requests for additional details), Bengtsson wrote in his [resignation letter to the GWPF](#),

"I see no limit and end to what will happen. It is a situation that reminds me about the time of McCarthy."

To be clear, this situation bears no resemblance to [McCarthyism](#) in the United States, which involved aggressive government investigations and questioning of people suspected of having ties to Communism. For more accurate parallels in climate science today, look instead at Virginia Attorney General [Ken Cuccinelli's witch-hunt](#) of Michael Mann or [the Climategate](#)

[inquiries directed at Phil Jones](#). A few colleagues withdrawing support and co-authorship with Bengtsson pales in comparison.

A few days later, Bengtsson told Rupert Murdoch's [The Times](#) that a peer-reviewer comment recommending rejection of a paper he co-authored mentioned how the 'skeptical' media would react to the study. The Murdoch media and other conservatively biased news outlets went berserk, with stories in [Fox News](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#), [The Mail Online](#), [The Telegraph](#), [The Times](#) again, [The Mail on Sunday](#), [The Australian](#), and [Drudge](#), inventing conspiracy theories involving censorship of 'inconvenient research'.

Bengtsson's submitted paper had made the case that the Earth's [climate sensitivity](#) to the increased greenhouse effect is relatively low by comparing the results of several previous studies, but had not made the case well. The journal in question, *Environmental Research Letters* [published the full comments from the reviewer](#) in question, showing that the recommendation to reject the paper was because,

"The overall innovation of the manuscript is very low ... The paper does not make any significant attempt at explaining or understanding the differences, it rather puts out a very simplistic negative message giving at least the implicit impression of "errors" being made within and between these assessments,"

Comments from a second reviewer were [even more brutal](#). This is precisely the purpose of peer-review – to filter out papers that aren't sufficiently accurate or don't add anything significant to our scientific understanding. In fact, *Environmental Research Letters* is a high-quality scientific journal with a 65% rejection rate. For examples of innovative research in this area, see our discussions of recent papers by NASA's [Drew Shindell](#) and Texas A&M's [Kummer & Dessler](#).

In fact, Bengtsson himself seemed taken aback by the conservative media distortions of the journal's rejection of his research (although one wonders why he leaked the reviewer comments to *The Times* to begin with), [telling the Science Media Centre](#),

"I do not believe there is any systematic "cover up" of scientific evidence on climate change or that academics' work is being "deliberately suppressed", as The Times front page suggests. I am worried by a wider trend that science is being gradually being influenced by political views. Policy decisions need to be based on solid fact."

One also wonders why Bengtsson joined GWPF if he's concerned about political views influencing science. Perhaps because Bengtsson's own political views can be rather extreme at times, [as exemplified by this comment](#) he left on a blog formerly known as *The Climate Scam*,

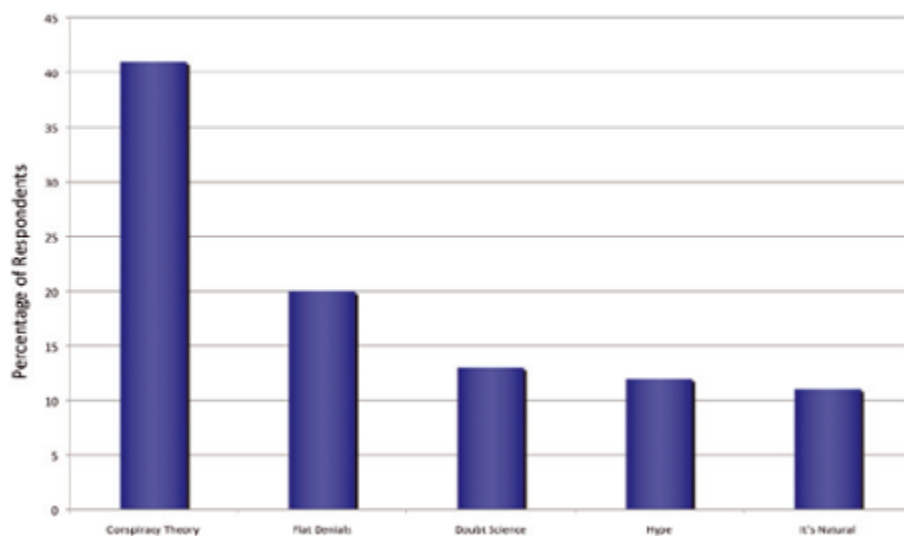
"It's a shame that the GDR [East Germany] disappeared otherwise would have been able to offer one-way tickets there for these socialists. Now there's unfortunately not many orthodox countries left soon and I surely do not imagine our romantic green Communists want a one-way ticket to North Korea. But if interested I'd gladly contribute to the trip as long as it is for a one way ticket."

Along with [Richard Lindzen joining the Cato Institute](#), Bengtsson now gives us two examples of 'skeptical' scientists becoming associated with political advocacy groups, and zero examples of mainstream climate scientists joining political organizations. Who is it that's politicizing science?

In any case, the accusations in the conservative media of climate journals suppressing research are clearly unfounded, even according to Bengtsson himself. It's also worth noting that [contrarians have been behind every documented case of climate journals behaving unethically](#).

It's easy to see why this distortion of reality so appealed to the conservative media. With a [97% expert consensus on human-caused global warming](#), it's difficult to justify maintaining the status quo, as politically conservative ideology tends to favor. The easiest way to argue for business-as-usual is if those 97% of climate experts are [part of a grand conspiracy](#). In fact, a [2012 paper by Smith & Leiserowitz](#) found,

"Associations with conspiracy theories (e.g., "the biggest scam in the world to date") accounted for the largest portion of 2010 [climate] naysayer images with over 40% of total responses for this category."



Climate naysayer image association results in Smith & Leiserowitz (2012). Source: Risk Analysis

Everybody loves a good conspiracy theory. Perhaps climate experts' conclusions are dictated by grant money, perhaps journals won't publish dissenting research, or perhaps these tens of thousands of climate experts have been subjected to a secret government brainwashing program led by Al Gore.

Or perhaps [the scientific evidence](#) overwhelmingly points to humans causing dangerously rapid climate change, and these conspiracy theories and manufactured controversies are just excuses to reject that inconvenient reality. You be the judge.