

Trump: An Open Mind or an Attack on Science?

After declaring that human-induced climate change is a hoax perpetrated by China in order to give them an economic advantage, President-Elect Trump subsequently announced that he "had an open mind" regarding human-caused climate change. But several recent actions by Mr. Trump and his transition team raise serious questions about how open that mind really is. His nominations for several climate and energy-related Cabinet and Federal agency posts are not reassuring.

Two other recent actions also suggest that his open mind pronouncement is disingenuous: 1) His stated intention to drastically reduce responsibility within NASA for climate science research, and 2) The recent memo to the Department of Energy demanding a list of DOE employees carrying out climate science and alternative energy research.

Several NASA laboratories are doing cutting-edge research on the Earth's climate. NASA manages many satellites gathering data that simply are not obtainable otherwise. This research has many important practical applications, including improved weather forecasting, monitoring of ground water reserves, the pace of deforestation, and the retreat of glaciers vital for fresh water. Removing NASA from these activities makes no more sense than asking the Navy to relinquish management of its aircraft carriers and submarines and turning them over to the Army or Air Force.

An open mind is one which welcomes and examines existing and new evidence. How can one possibly have an "open mind" if access to such evidence is curtailed or eliminated?

The same is true of the memo sent by the Trump transition team to the Department of Energy requesting a list of the names of people "who have worked on climate change", "attended the annual global climate talks hosted by the United Nations within the last five years", as well as "all publications written by employees at the department's 17 national laboratories for the past three years", websites that were accessed, and more.

This bald attempt at intimidation of climate scientists goes well beyond the question of an "open mind." For those of us old enough to remember, it is eerily reminiscent of "lists of names" demanded by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his cronies in the 50's for so-called "subversive activities". In the process, thousands of careers of honorable people were destroyed.

Such intimidation need not be limited to climate change and alternative sources of energy. It can equally well apply to many other areas of scientific inquiry, whether stem cell research, mental illness, or toxic chemicals. Attempts to inhibit scientific inquiry will be extremely damaging to America's leadership in science and technology, its economic wellbeing, its national security and its global reputation.

It is also damaging to the very core of our democracy. Commenting on the September 20th publication of an Open Letter by 375 members of the National Academy of Sciences urging that climate change be taken seriously (responsiblescientists.org), science communicator par excellence, Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson, said “for lawmakers to not heed the advice of esteemed scientists on matters of science, in this the 21st century, signals the beginning of the end of an informed democracy.”

I agree. This is a concern that should transcend political party affiliations. Republicans and Democrats alike, inside and outside of Congress, should strongly protest and condemn these two actions by the incoming administration.