

## Science Under Siege

Clive Hamilton

When the denial machine goes after climate scientists it is, [as one of them said](#), like the marines going into battle against boy scouts. The brutality of the attacks has once again been confirmed by [the release](#) of some of the emails sent to Phil Jones, the University of East Anglia climate scientist at the centre of the “Climategate” storm.

The emails make for sickening reading and anyone receiving them would be foolish not to treat the death threats as potentially serious.

Australian climate scientists have [for some years](#) been receiving the same kind of abuse and threats. Every time Andrew Bolt targets a scientist for criticism he or she receives a torrent of aggression from his legion of followers.

The objective of the cyber-bullying is obvious, to drive climate scientists (and anyone else who writes about climate change, including journalists) out of the public debate. Some of the more resolute scientists have said that they will not be intimidated, but they would not be human if they were not at least disturbed by the threats.

Of course, the hate-speech coming from climate deniers is anathema to everything universities stand for. The abuse and death threats have taken public discourse to a different level, something akin to the ferocity of the anticommunist crusades against intellectuals in the 50s and 60s.

I know that some young scientists have been turned off becoming climate scientists because they don't want to expose themselves and their families to the violence of the debate. And who can blame them? Most scientists are ‘boy scouts’ when it comes to politics; they went into science because they were drawn to the cocoon of the lab where plenty of intellectual excitement can be found without having to muscle up to professional political operatives.

So it was tactlessness bordering on cruelty for the editor-in-chief of *The Australian* to respond to news of the death threats by [telling scientists](#) they just need to “harden up”, as he recently did under the heading “Death threats just par for the course”. For Mitchell receiving an email like the following is just par for the course:

“I will smack the living shit out of you bitch so back the Fuck off I am a one-man swat team You do not want to fuck with me OK do you get the picture friend?”

Which course, exactly, does *The Australian* have in mind?

Mitchell has cause to trivialize the threats because in its [war on science](#) his newspaper has done more than a thousand cyber-bullies to disparage and ridicule climate scientists, and thereby validate the kind of hatred the loonies send from the computers in their bedrooms.

In one of its more vicious tactics *The Australian* has mounted a campaign to undermine the credibility of scientists' claims about abuse and death threats. To this end Christian Kerr wrote a beat-up insinuating that ANU scientists had lied about the threats.

Mitchell, Kerr and legal affairs writer Chris Merritt are behaving like defence lawyers in a rape trial, attempting to pull apart the victim's testimony and in doing so compounding the violation.

When climate scientists both receive death threats and are abused by the Murdoch press for lying about them, the campaign only increases the pressure to redirect their work to more peaceful areas, with the danger that the Australian public will be left in the dark about the defining issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For it turns out that climate scientists, innocently going about their research, have turned up a body of evidence that happens to challenge the conservative worldview, the world of 'individual freedoms', unfettered markets, corporate power and exploitation of nature, the worldview shared by both Rupert's bunnies and the cyber-bullies.

For those of us brought up to have faith in the Enlightenment, it has been shocking to discover that, when a mountain of facts comes up against a powerful ideology, the ideology can prevail.

It is frightening to think that the next Federal Government will in all likelihood be led by a climate denier. Tony Abbott will appoint people like Bob Carter and Ian Plimer, fringe scientists who are unable to back their rejection of climate science with any publishable research, to all sorts of boards and offices where they will wage a holy war against the real climate scientists.

The boy scouts will be in for a real kicking, this time an officially sanctioned one. In the end, of course, we will all feel the pain.

Clive Hamilton is professor of public ethics at Charles Sturt University in Canberra and the author of *Requiem for a Species: Why we resist the truth about climate change* (2010).