MAKING WAVES

JOHNSON SHOYAMA
Centre for the Study of Science and Innovation Policy
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FROM QUEEN CITY TO CLOWN CITY

It's unclear whether anyone ever said that all publicity is good publicity, but city councilors in Regina have had reason to doubt that maxim after the furour that erupted around their decision to pay a substantial speaker's fee to bring climate sceptic Patrick Moore to their conference on sustainable cities. Facing a social media backlash, the City reversed its decision in an embarrassing about face that fails to repair the original reputational damage. Moore is now scheduled to attend an event in Regina organized by Rebel Media on the day before the conference[1], an event that Regina mayor Michael Fougere has said he will attend. What a mess.

Moore is an interesting phenomenon in the world of science and climate policy. Many of his critics take the line tweeted by University of Saskatchewan Professor Ryan Brook[2], that Moore is "anti-science." Nothing could be further from the truth. He is much more dangerous than that. Moore holds a PhD in Ecology from UBC and has defended a number of unpopular positions during his lengthy career as an early Greenpeace activist and later as an industry PR man. Most of them are based on evidence found in scientifically credible literature and I'm not at all ashamed to say that I concur with a good many of them, e.g. that it's hard to see how we will achieve rapid decarbonization of power production without the use of nuclear energy; that clearcutting is a valid silvicultural prescription for some forest sites; and that there is currently no evidence that genetically modified organisms have caused harm to humans[3].

In asserting those claims, Moore has engaged in lengthy and bruising battles with those who, for one reason or another, are inclined to deny the clear evidence that supports them. He has learned from them that one of the best ways to undermine a scientific conclusion supported by evidence accepted as valid by a broad consensus of scientists is to exploit a basic feature of science itself. Unlike religious or ideological dogma, scientific conclusions are essentially provisional—a key aspect of science that supports the growth of scientific knowledge. Good scientists accept that conclusions that looked very solid in the past have been overturned by new evidence and that there's every likelihood much of what we accept today will turn out to be, at best, only partially true.

To the layperson's mind, however, the existence of doubt and controversy is highly troubling. If scientific claims are only provisionally true, how can we base policy decisions that affect the livelihoods and expectations of millions of people on them? In fact, this is a very good question that most of us working in public policy spend too little time thinking about. It is especially troubling in the case of climate mitigation policies where the impact is not just on a single industry or single sector but on just about everything that we do (which is the reason why climate policy attracts those groups whose primary interest lies in changing how we live rather than in greenhouse gas mitigation). The answer, which I don't have space to explore here, is unfortunately, complex and lies in the quality of the institutionalization of scientific advice in different political systems, for example in Chief Scientific Officers, Advisory Boards, Expert Panels, regulatory assessments, professional accreditation, the certification of expert witnesses, and all those other aspects of public administration that the early-twentieth century political scientist Max Weber called "the slow boring of hard boards".

For Moore and others with no time for "slow", the vertigo inducing quality of scientific uncertainty is an opportunity to introduce doubt about issues and policies which

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otherwise enjoy broad scientific support. Whatever the reasons for Moore's instinctive hostility towards it, the scientific consensus about anthropogenic climate change and its consequences is the classic example. In spite of the care taken by the IPCC to attach probabilities to their various pathways and outcomes (never a strongpoint of those without a relatively advanced mathematical education as the robust health of the gambling industry tends to demonstrate), there are plenty of examples of scientists who have attached more weight to these conclusions than they can currently bear, e.g. on the connection between particular extreme weather events or natural disasters and climate change. For someone, like Moore, who actually understands how scientific research is conducted and how findings are established and questioned, ferreting out the inconsistencies and exaggerations and using them to assert that the scientific consensus is just a matter of opinion about which reputable scientists disagree is a relatively easy task. This is not anti-science. It is using the scientific

JEREMY RAYNER, Director, Centre for the Study of Science and Innovation Policy, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan

Dr. Rayner earned his Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia and was the principal investigator on a 2009 grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council that looked at using transition management theories to understand the options for sustainable power generation in Saskatchewan. His research currently focuses on governance arrangements for complex policy problems, especially at the intersection of forests, climate change and energy.

method to undermine the role of scientific evidence in policy making.

The final piece in the puzzle of how Regina City Council came to issue the invitation lies in the curious convention of "balance" in media reporting and public events, something else that Moore is expert at exploiting. There's now a great deal of helpful advice for the media about how to avoid the worst excesses of this convention, whereby reporting on an issue always has to feature a competing perspective—even when one is the overwhelming consensus of expert opinion and the other is the view of a disgruntled maverick—each presented as if they had equal weight[4]. Whether it was a misguided effort at balance or a more sinister attempt to abuse the convention to promote views held by a surprisingly large number of people in Saskatchewan[5], the effect was to provide Moore with a platform that his views don't deserve.

It's relatively easy to direct people to good practices around the convention of "balance" and how it works in any particular case. The great nineteenth century liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill argued that it was good for those who accept established truths to be confronted by dissent, otherwise those truths become flabby and people actually forget how to defend them (an ancient belief that has its dying echo in the tradition of public PhD defences). It's possible that a public confrontation between Moore and conventional exponents of sustainability might have had that effect, though I doubt it, and the decision to rescind the invitation[6] was the right one. However, it's a good deal harder to deal with "science against itself" and I certainly don't have any easy answers. Perhaps the existence of people like Patrick Moore is the price we have to pay for scientific progress and, if so, he comes cheap at his speaker's fee.

References

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