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Corrupting Expectations

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On the horn of underlying assumptions

Assume you are a scientist and have been given a major financial grant to prove that the mythical unicorn really did exist.

You know that as long as you can demonstrate some progress in showing the unicorn might have existed, your financial grant will be renewed each year, provided some other scientist does not come out with substantial evidence that the unicorn could not have existed.

Under such conditions, you would have a very strong incentive to disregard much of the evidence that the unicorn could not have existed and each year provide only the data that could demonstrate that the unicorn might have existed. You also would have a very strong incentive to attack any scientist who raised serious questions or provided evidence that the unicorn could not have existed.

You even might go so far as to refer to them with the disparaging term "unicorn deniers" and attempt to use your influence with other scientists who also are receiving grants dependent on the existence of the unicorn to try to prevent the unicorn deniers from publishing their findings in well-regarded scientific journals.

The recently released e-mails (by whistleblowers or hackers, depending on your prejudice) between some of the best-known scientists behind global warming showed that they succumbed to the all-too-human tendency to protect their turfs and pocketbooks, despite the evidence.

As an economist, not a climatologist, I have followed the debate carefully for years. It has been all too evident that many in the man-made-global-warming camp have vested interests in certain outcomes because of the government grants they receive. (This is not meant to imply that most scientists have sold their integrity for government grants.)

It has been known for a couple of hundred years that the Earth goes through regular cooling and warming cycles. The legitimate debate is about how much man-made carbon dioxide (and other greenhouse gases) contributes to the current cycle, if at all, and whether it is more cost-effective (or even possible) to try to modify climate change or just adapt to it through engineering changes (e.g., the dikes in Holland) and building at a greater distance from the shoreline.

My colleagues at the Cato Institute found many highly qualified climate scientists (hundreds of whom were willing to sign a public statement) who seriously questioned much of the "science" behind many of the legislative and other public policy demands of the global warming lobby.

Members of the media are usually quick to understand and publicize conflicts of interest for public officials when it comes to road-building contracts and the like but seem to be blind to the conflicts of interest for scientists and others who claim to be impartial scholars. The United

Nations' report on climate change is considered by many in the media and the political world to be a gold-plated standard of truth when it comes to the climate-change evidence - which we now know is tainted. What the media and the political class should be doing is seeking out those highly qualified climatologists and other relevant scientific experts with no financial or other vested interests (which include grants from either governments or industries that may have an economic interest) to provide independent evaluations of the evidence and arguments from all sources.

In my own field of economics, we find an international tax-increase lobby, almost all of whose members are dependent on government grants (directly or indirectly), to be endlessly lobbying for more taxes and regulations, which increase the power of the political class. The lobby routinely ignores the evidence that almost all governments tax and spend at rates far above the welfare and growth-maximizing rates and that more taxes and bigger expenditures reduce both economic opportunity and individual liberty.

Again ignoring the evidence from almost everywhere that more government makes things worse rather than better, the proponents of higher taxes also argue that government is about the only force for good and, if government only had more money, it would manage things better and waste less.

Sen. Judd Gregg, New Hampshire Republican, and Sen. Kent Conrad, North Dakota Democrat, have proposed a new, bipartisan commission to deal with the government deficit, and it already has 31 sponsors. The advocates know it ultimately will recommend some cuts in government spending and increases in some taxes. They are either intellectually ignorant or corrupt because the effort is focused on the deficit, which is only a residual of the real problem - excessive government spending -

which neither party has the intellectual and moral courage to address seriously.

Can you think of something much more intellectually dishonest than saying health care reform will insure many millions more, will not add to the deficit, will not result in any increases in taxes for anyone but the rich and will "bend the cost curve down"? Hmmm.

Businesspeople are fined and even sent to jail for making false claims about what their goods or services will do. If false-claims standards were applied to the political class (and those who report this misinformation as fact) how many in Congress, the administration and mainstream media would be out of jail?

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