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Why Climate-Change Ideology Is Dying

Voters have concluded that the private jet-flying alarmists don't really believe their own claims.

By Barton Swaim

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Illustration: David Gothard

Momentous social movements begin to die the moment adherents figure out their leaders don't believe what they say. Liberal Protestantism's long decline started in the 1950s, when congregants began to wonder if their ministers still believed the old creeds (they didn't). Communism dies wherever it's tried because sooner or later the proletariat realize their self-appointed champions aren't particularly interested in equality. Many sects and cults dwindle the moment their supposedly ascetic leaders are revealed to be libertines.

Something similar is happening to climate ideology.

For three decades you were labeled a crank, a "climate denier," someone who pigheadedly rejects "settled science," if you didn't embrace the belief that life on earth faces imminent extinction from "global warming" and, later, "climate change." The possibility that an entire academic discipline, climate science, could have gone badly amiss by groupthink and self-flattery wasn't thought possible. In many quarters this orthodoxy still reigns unquestioned.

That climate ideology was alarmist and in no way settled should have been obvious. For many, it was. The conclusions of genuine scientific inquiry rarely reinforce the social and political biases of power brokers and influencers, but climate science, like some of the softer social sciences, did exactly that. It purported to discover foreboding trends in inscrutable data and assured us that the only way to arrest them was to do what America's liberal cultural elite wanted to do anyway—amass political and economic power in the hands of credentialed technocrats, supposedly for the good of all.

The ordinary person, though lacking familiarity with the latest peer-reviewed science, wasn't wrong to regard the whole business with skepticism. His suspicions were further aroused by contemplating the sheer immensity of the data, all correctly interpreted, required to confirm the conclusions asserted by climate science and its media champions.

Were scientists really so confident they understood what was happening with sunbeams in the upper atmosphere, or that they knew how to gauge accurately the temperature of roughly 200 million square miles of the Earth's surface, or that they knew how to compare present-day temperatures with those that obtained 50, 100, 1,000 or 5,000 years ago? Or, more important still, that they knew what political and economic measures would mitigate the theoretical apocalypse they inferred from these mountains of data?

Even if aggregate global temperatures are warming, the question is whether this will lead to civilizational cataclysm unless humans radically rearrange how they live. Many capable interpreters of the evidence think the answer is no.

But what has finally convinced ordinary people that the doomsayers are wrong isn't any interpretation of climate figures. It is the palpable sense that very few of the doomsayers believe what they say.

Why aren't the moguls and corporate executives who claim to be unnerved by the predictions of climate science giving up their carbon-heavy lifestyles and living in caves—or at least in simpler dwellings than mansions? If progressive VIPs in media, politics and entertainment believe sea levels are ready to rise precipitously, why do they keep buying properties in Martha's Vineyard, Bar Harbor, Provincetown, Santa Monica and Malibu?

The climate lobby can wave aside these questions if it wishes, but appeals to reports and studies weigh little against the appearance of insincerity. If activists predicting global mayhem really believe what they predict, they would favor an instant transition to zero-emission nuclear power. But they mostly don't. Every September the transnational elite gather at the U.N. General Assembly to denounce America for its failure to limit carbon emissions—and clog the streets of Manhattan for a week with their privately chartered oversize SUVs.

Disdain for climate alarmism has gone mainstream. Last year the liberal comedian Bill Maher delivered a monologue on his television show in which he blistered celebrities who insist on the need to reduce our "carbon footprint" but zip around the globe on private jets. It is a masterpiece of political invective and has been viewed online by millions.

I don't call any of this "hypocrisy," because that term properly refers to the difference between private behavior and public words, and in the case of climate alarmism there is no attempt to hide the behavior or to make it match the words. So, for instance, the Defense Innovation Board, a group sponsored by the Pentagon and chaired by former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, issued two studies this month recommending the reconstitution and strengthening of America's defense industrial base. The reports have merit. But following all their recommendations would require the procurement of vast arrays of manufactured materials produced with natural gas, petrochemicals and coal. Meanwhile, Mr. Bloomberg oversees two nonprofit organizations, Beyond Coal and Beyond Petrochemicals, whose stated aim is to end the country's use of natural gas, petrochemicals and coal.

Mr. Bloomberg isn't embarrassed by the contradiction. He hasn't tried to explain it, except indirectly in a vaguely worded Washington Post <u>op-ed</u>, co-authored with David H. Berger. "The technology needed to make today's advanced military supplies," Messrs. Bloomberg and Berger write, "relies on computer chips more than blast furnaces and on research labs more than assembly lines." Sure. But it does rely on blast furnaces and power stations of the sort Mr. Bloomberg's activist groups want to shut down. Which will make any thinking person wonder if he believes the catastrophism emitted by his nonprofits.

Climate skeptics groused about these and many similar contradictions for two generations, to little effect on the consensus that ruled unquestioned in boardrooms, universities and government agencies. Then Los Angeles burst into flames. California has been run for many years by people who believe, or say they believe, that climate change is an immediate threat to civilization. Yet now, as thousands of homes are destroyed by fires spread by a seasonal wind so historically predictable it has a name, state and local officials, with the endorsement of a cheerleading media, blame climate change.

These same officials have told us for decades that they accept the direst predictions of climate activists, but they have done little to counter what they now purport to be the effects of climate change. Mayor Karen Bass's 2024-25 budget proposed a 2.7% cut to the Los Angeles Fire Department, mainly in areas of new equipment purchases. And although the department's total budget later increased as a result of salary negotiations, it's pretty obvious that the dangers of wildfires—supposedly the outcome of climate change—weren't foremost on city leaders' minds. California has for years underinvested in land management, which might have inhibited the fires from spreading, and water storage, which would have enabled firefighters to put out more fires.

Climate catastrophism has begun to die, the victim of its apostles' unbelief.

