

## Backlash by CO2 sceptics begins to gain ground

News analysis

Man-made global warming deniers have claimed their first political victim, writes

Clive Cookson

The resurgent climate change sceptic movement claimed its first political scalp this week when Australia's opposition Liberal party dumped its leader, Malcolm Turnbull, over his support for the federal government's legislation to reduce carbon emissions..

Tony Abbott, the new opposition leader, has said the argument for climate change is "crap" and he is unconvinced by the science. This week he ruled out the two main methods that have been proposed for reducing carbon emissions: a trading scheme and a carbon tax.

However, global public opinion polls continue to show that most people around the world regard climate change as a serious man-made problem and favour action against it. Scepticism is strongest – and growing fastest – in the US, though even here a majority of voters believes carbon dioxide is causing global warming.

Lorraine Whitmarsh, an environmental psychologist at Cardiff University in Wales, says opinion worldwide is becoming more polarised along political lines, with supporters of more rightwing parties much more likely to doubt the need for action on climate change.

Some militant sceptics, such as Craig Rucker, director of the US-based Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, linked Mr Turnbull's political demise to the "Climategate scandal" – the release a week ago by computer hackers of thousands of e-mails sent to and from the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in the UK.

Political observers say Climategate had little effect on Mr Turnbull's fate. They believe he was instead the victim of those within the Liberal party who regard an exchange-based trading scheme as an unjustified burden on the country's economy.

But Prof Whitmarsh warns climate scientists that the negative impact of Climategate may be long-lasting. "It may resonate for a long time and support the doubters," she says. "The Great Global Warming Swindle [a sceptical television programme broadcast in 2007] is still having an effect today."

Another Commonwealth country with a vocal sceptical minority is Canada. An organisation called Friends of Science launched a national advertising campaign last month mocking the idea of climate change. The radio ads claim the Earth has cooled in the past decade and that any changes in the climate are caused by the sun.

Some environmental activists regard Canada as what George Monbiot of Britain recently called “a thuggish petro-state”, intent on derailing any climate change agreement at Copenhagen.

Stephen Harper, Canadian prime minister, had originally said he would not attend the Copenhagen talks. But he changed his mind late last month, a day after Barack Obama, the US president, said he would be there. In practice, Canada has increasingly moved in parallel with the US on climate change matters.

In Washington, the debate over climate change centres less on whether it is happening or not than on the costs of taking action against it. With the exception of a few deniers like Jim Inhofe, the Republican senator from Oklahoma (see box), climate change is a widely-accepted reality among the political establishment. Although the Republicans are widely regarded outside the US as climate sceptics, most senior members of the party accept man-made global warming is a reality.

What makes action to stop climate change so politically difficult in the US is the fact that it is a regional issue, pitting representatives of industrial and agricultural states – whose constituents would bear the cost of any restrictions – against those of the environmentally aware east and west coasts.

Take, for example, Ben Nelson, the senator from Nebraska and one of the Democrats most resistant to climate change legislation. He does not deny global warming: he just does not want to impose more regulation and higher costs on the farmers and coalminers in his state.

“I don’t think that the farmers or the ranchers necessarily buy the argument that it’s all going to be offset,” Mr Nelson told CNBC last month.

The European Union prides itself on being the first big economy to embrace ambitious emissions cuts after leaders agreed to a landmark climate package last December. In the run-up to that agreement, there were murmurs from some dissenting governments – notably Italy – about whether global warming was, in fact, a man-made phenomenon.

The recent European parliament elections that brought several fringe politicians to Brussels, such as Nick Griffin, the leader of the far-right British National party, have also added to the climate sceptics’ ranks.

One of the developing world’s most prominent sceptics is Luiz Carlos Molion, a physicist and meteorologist at Brazil’s Federal University of Alagoas.

He argues that cutting carbon emissions will have no impact on climate change and be a disaster for the global economy.

But he says he is drowned out by advocates of man-made climate change. “Sadly this is no longer a scientific issue,” he says, “but a political and economic platform.”

Additional reporting by Peter Smith, Christopher Mason, Anna Fifield, Joshua Chaffin and Jonathan Wheatley