

# Climate scientists exonerated in hacked emails inquiry

Chris Talbot  
26 April 2010

An independent inquiry into the conduct of scientists at the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) of the University of East Anglia in Britain has found “absolutely no evidence of any impropriety whatsoever.”

The inquiry, led by Lord Oxburgh, former chair of the House of Lords science and technology select committee, was investigating allegations of scientific misconduct.

Emails from the scientists, particularly from the director of the CRU Professor Phil Jones, were hacked into last November and given extensive media coverage in the run up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. Nobody has been prosecuted for the email thefts, involving hundreds of documents and emails dating back over 13 years that were hacked from the university computer system. But they were pored over by climate sceptics, many of them backed by the oil corporations and rightwing think-tanks, opposed to action over global warming.

Public opinion was hugely manipulated in what is now inevitably termed “climate-gate”. Quotes were taken out of context from the emails that suggested that papers were being suppressed that were critical of the overwhelming scientific consensus that human-based emissions are responsible for increased global warming. An email that referred to a “trick” in how the data was presented was particularly singled out. Claims were made that data was being manipulated by ideologically motivated scientists.

Professor Jones was hounded by the media, and stood down from his post while independent investigations into the affair were carried out. In December the *Guardian* reported that CRU scientists were receiving death threats. Jones told reporters in January that he had contemplated suicide due to the level of criticism being levelled against the CRU.

As well as the Oxburgh inquiry, another inquiry into the scientific practice of the CRU, headed by Sir Muir Russell, former vice-chancellor of Glasgow University, is continuing. The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee also investigated the issue, particularly whether scientific data was being withheld from the public. While

this investigation exonerated the CRU, it pressed for data and computer programs to be made public and considered that the University of East Anglia had a responsibility to uphold “transparency” under the UK Freedom of Information law.

Since the email hacking, the media, especially the Murdoch press, has continued to question climate change science. Journalists and climate change sceptics trawled through the three 2007 reports issued by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Produced by a tiny full-time staff, the reports bring together work from 450 lead scientific authors and 800 contributing authors internationally. Each of the reports is about a thousand pages long, and went through a three-stage review process involving 2,500 expert reviewers. It is hardly surprising that small errors were found, given this cumbersome process, but claims that the science was discredited were widely circulated in the media.

In the United States an opinion poll conducted by Rasmussen in March showed that only 53 percent of the population thought that global warming is a problem, compared to 42 percent who don’t think it is a problem. A year ago the figures were 64 percent and 32 percent. In the UK a February poll conducted by Populus showed that those who thought climate change was a reality and “now established as largely man-made” was only 28 percent, compared to 41 percent last November. A Populus spokesman told the BBC, “It is very unusual indeed to see such a dramatic shift in opinion in such a short period.”

The shift points to the success of the hacking operation and accompanying media frenzy in manipulating public opinion.

The media allegations that Professor Jones and the small unit at the CRU are in some way distorting the science of climate change, or are part of a global conspiracy, does not stand up to any objective examination. Jones has worked for decades on the collection of temperature data, beginning long before climate change became controversial. The CRU’s findings are not essentially different from those of thousands of scientists throughout the world.

Criticism by UK politicians that the CRU was not sharing data under the 1998 Data Protection Act is the height of hypocrisy. The British government routinely refuses information requests under the “national security” exemption.

The scientists pointed out that much of their data came from the meteorological services of some 150 countries, which they did not have permission to make public. It was pointed out by the Oxburgh inquiry that the British government introduced the practice of charging for the use of their data, followed by several other countries, hardly an inducement for “transparency”. Some countries have refused any public access to their data at all. Neither is there a common practice of publishing hundreds of pages of data or computer code, even on websites, in any other branch of science.

The claim that Professor Jones and others had prevented articles from being published is easily refuted. One paper that the emails said should not have been allowed was published in a peer-reviewed journal, *Climate Research*. The paper challenged the accepted view that the increase in global warming is man-made and turned out to be funded by the American Petroleum Institute. Half the editorial board of the journal resigned, because the paper had not been stopped by the peer review process. Subsequent papers heavily criticised it. Another two papers that Jones said he would keep out of the IPCC report were in fact included in the report.

The CRU email referring to using a “trick” did not mean that scientists were dishonest. It was a colloquial expression for a statistical method of combining older tree-ring data dating back over 2,000 years with the thermometer data from the past 150 years. It was published in the journal *Nature* in 1998, and the difficulties involved in the techniques are well known in climate science.

Criticisms made by climate change deniers that the statistical errors in their work made any prediction impossible was refuted by the statistician in the Oxburgh inquiry, Professor David Hand of Imperial College, London. Hand was critical of CRU for not using the most up-to-date statistical methods but added, “In reading the [scientific] papers, the CRU have to be commended because of the many cautionary comments and qualifications they make in those papers”.

He continued, “There is no evidence at all of anything underhand, the opposite if anything, in that they have brought out in the open the uncertainties associated with what they are doing”.

Challenges to the IPCC reports are even more easily refuted. It is true that the second report included an incorrect two-sentence statement, taken from a World Wildlife Fund

report and not a scientific journal, that there was a likelihood of Himalayan glaciers disappearing by 2035. This was seized on as disproving climate science by the *Wall Street Journal*, Fox News, the *Washington Times*, and many media outlets. In fact the first IPCC report contains dozens of pages written by expert glaciologists with scientifically valid predictions of the real rate of decline of glaciers.

The claim that 40 percent of Brazilian rain forest is at risk from small reductions in the amount of rainfall made in the IPCC reports was attacked for not being based on scientific peer-reviewed literature. It is true that the IPCC did not adequately reference the claim, but the science has been carried out and references can be given.

Further material refuting attacks on the IPCC reports, such as the issue of Chinese temperature data that it is alleged by deniers not to be reliable, can be found on the Union of Concerned Scientists website.

Other issues used by climate change deniers are also tackled by UCS. For example, there is a long-term decline of the thickness of Arctic sea ice, despite recent claims to the contrary, and there are weather changes in the US and other parts of the world that are consistent with global warming.

That the media has allowed such attacks on climate science and scientists to gain publicity is consistent with a profit system that is completely unable to tackle this major threat to the future of humanity, as was demonstrated by the debacle at Copenhagen. Market-based carbon trading schemes, now being touted in the proposed climate change bill of the Obama administration, while giving handouts to sections of industry give no guarantees of reducing carbon emissions. Figures for the first phase of the European Union scheme (2005-07) show an actual net increase of emissions by 1.9 percent. It has also given a huge opportunity for fraud, with Europol reporting last year that in some EU countries 90 percent of the market volume of traded emissions could be the result of tax fraud, costing governments more than €5 billion.



To contact the WWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**