

# On global warming, settled science and George Brandis

April 23 2014, by Matthew Bailes

---

The Australian Attorney General, Senator George Brandis is no stranger to controversy. His [statement in parliament](#) that "people do have a right to be bigots" rapidly gained him notoriety, and it isn't hard to understand why. Lately he's in the news again, this time concerning climate change.

The Guardian recently ran a news story with the headline "[George Brandis: sidelining climate change deniers is 'deplorable'](#)". It went on saying the Attorney general accuses 'true believers in climate change' of being 'ignorant', 'medieval' and trying to shut down debate.

Headlines in the Sydney Morning Herald read "[Climate change proponents using 'mediaeval' tactics": George Brandis](#)".

Anyone reading these stories might think that Brandis actually said that people who believe in climate change are ignorant and medieval and that he is presumably a climate change skeptic.

## What Brandis really thinks

Actually, if you read the [spiked interview](#), you learn that George Brandis says he accepts that [global warming](#) is real and that something should be done about it.

His main issue was that he felt the Labor politicians claimed that the "science is settled" and hence any debate was pointless. In this respect,

he believes their approach, and that of many climate change advocates is both medieval and ignorant.

This is quite different from what the headlines might have us think about his thoughts on the underlying issue of climate change. For Brandis, the issue is about how science is debated, not whether climate change is real or not.

As a scientist I have always found the statement frequented by Labor politicians that "the science is settled" very unsettling.

In science we propose a theory, we test it rigorously, and we keep testing until it breaks or becomes so obvious that it is true in almost any circumstances that we spend our time testing other things.

The theory becomes more and more accepted, and more probable that it is "settled" although we're loathe to claim it so. The danger of claiming that something is settled when it may not be is that you end up in danger of being the "boy who cried wolf!" should the small chance you are wrong transpiring.

So the pure scientist within me has some sympathy for George's position in an absolute sense, although as we shall see, there are some practical problems with his stance, and the idea that the "real victims" are those opposed to mainstream views on climate change is a bit hard to swallow.

## **Fundamental physics "theories"**

Things such as Newtonian gravity and mechanics are just *so right* in the everyday human context that no reasonable scientist even bothers to question them anymore. Sure, at relativistic speeds, or in the presence of incredibly dense and massive objects we need Einstein's better versions of gravity, Special and General Relativity, but for day to day calculations

Newtonian physics is, well, kind of "settled".

In George's world, it would be quite reasonable for someone to state that they thought Newtonian physics was deeply flawed, that it was part of a world-wide conspiracy to defraud the tax-payer and that the scientists propagating it were "cultists". After all, that's all part of free speech right?

Unfortunately in my day job I am an astronomer who tests the theory of General Relativity and this makes me the target of random emails from (often retired) gentlemen with new theories of gravity and the Universe, many of whom are sure that there are indeed conspiracies abounding in science.

I keep them in a special folder and might write a book about them one day. One of my favourites begins:

*"One LOOP of the CHAIN"*

*LOOP...! LOOP...! LOOPS...!*

*Which...? Where...? When...?*

*Thoughtfully I was sitting on my balcony enjoying my Cigarette. Of course I am CHAIN smoker for the past 30 years and am an expert in blowing out LOOPS of smoke.*

The author then respectfully asks for my opinion on his theories. In George's world I should "engage with him intellectually and show him why he is wrong". The problem is that we speak a different scientific language. I use measurements, peer-reviewed publications and mathematics, he uses smoke ring observations. A debate is pointless.

Another series of emails from a [climate change](#) denier states:

*The inescapable conclusion to Climategate and current economic unrest is unpalatable:*

1. *Henry Kissinger, Chinese Chairman Mao, and Chinese Prime Minister Chou-en-lai secretly agreed to use anthropogenic global climate change as the "common enemy" in 1971 [1] in order to:*

*a.) Unite nations,*

*b.) End the space race, and*

*c.) Avoid the threat of nuclear annihilation.*

He goes on to claim that the accepted energy source of the Sun (nuclear fusion) rather than his own theory of a neutron star is some kind of conspiracy linked to "climategate".

And they continue:

*I greatly support your protest. As a former member of the Department of Mathematics of Harvard University under DOE financial support, I am fully qualified to state that Einstein's gravitation is the most flawed, inconsistent and theological theory of the 20-th century. In support of this view, I herewith attach a paper published in the refereed journal "Galilean Electrodynamics" presenting NINE THEOREMS OF CATASTROPHIC INCONSISTENCIES OF EINSTEIN GRAVITATION.*

I'm sorry George, but trying to debate anything with these people or someone who thinks that the Universe is 7000 years old when astronomical observations tell us it is more like 13.6 billion, or that evolution hasn't been occurring is just a bit pointless.

## Climate science

Climate science is a broad field but the critical, perhaps defining issue of our time is whether or not the climate is changing in a potentially catastrophic way due to man-made emissions.

In all fields of science that I'm familiar with, the best place to look for authoritative opinions are from expert researchers in universities and government laboratories. When you do that in [climate science](#) you find the overwhelming majority are of the opinion that the Earth is getting warmer, that we're the cause of it and that unless we do something about it, the consequences could be catastrophic.

### **Does this mean that the "science is settled"?**

Well no, but this doesn't mean that professional scientists should have to debate random bloggers who have mastered little more than "excel" or on the other hand that politicians should link every climatic extrema to global warming.

If politicians want to be more like scientists they should state that there is a very real probability that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are linked to growth in global temperatures, that this may lead to an increased frequency in climatic extrema, and that as a precaution, it might be wise to start reducing our dependence upon fossil fuels.

The economic impact, pace and incentives for any cuts are political issues more worthy of their time than correlations between CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations and temperature, and different extrapolations of climate models into the future.

Brandis is correct to point out that as in the best of scientific traditions

we need to be free to challenge scientific orthodoxy, and able to debate and defend our position, but this is best done in the scientific literature, not via blogs or in Parliament.

*This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) (under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).*

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: On global warming, settled science and George Brandis (2014, April 23) retrieved 5 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-04-global-science-george-brandis.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--