

24 March 2010

## Academia UK: just another PC think tank

**Recently rejected two papers ... from people saying CRU has it wrong over Siberia. Went to town in both reviews, hopefully successfully. If either appears I will be very surprised, but you never know with GRL.**

Professor Phil Jones, head of CRU, email 31 March 2004

**[One of the two papers refereed by Jones was by Lars Kamel who] claimed to find much less warming than Jones, despite analysing much the same data ... The finding sounded important, but his paper was rejected by *Geophysical Research Letters* (GRL) that year.**

Guardian, 2 February 2010

Wikipedia defines a think tank as an organisation that “conducts research and engages in advocacy”. Roughly speaking, a think tank is a collection of people sharing a certain belief, who seek to present research that will promote that belief. Objectivity and the pursuit of knowledge tend to take second place to the desire to provide support for a particular viewpoint or policy programme.

More specifically, think tanks could be said to possess the following characteristics.

- (1) They are usually mixed up with politics.
- (2) Because they are driven largely by policy considerations, criteria such as intellectual progress, or correspondence to reality, tend to matter little or not at all.
- (3) In view of (2), the innate ability of its members (to make genuine intellectual progress) tends to matter little or not at all.
- (4) The detailed content of the think tank’s output has to look good, but it does not have to mean much. The putative conclusions and policy implications are what count.
- (5) Diligence, truthfulness and attention to detail are not necessary. All that is required is that it should not be too easy to pick holes in what is published.
- (6) Since criteria such as truth and objectivity are relatively unimportant, internal politics becomes very important. This applies to (a) jockeying for position between different think tanks, and (b) jockeying by individual players within think tanks.
- (7) Hence what is prized and promoted in terms of personal characteristics are social and political skills, including the ability to be dishonest. Also desirable is an ability to reproduce jargon and other aspects of academic technique such as pseudo-mathematicisation. What is not particularly prized, provided the other criteria are satisfied, is a desire to make genuine progress, or the ability to do so.
- (8) What looks impressive on paper — qualifications, training, number of publications — is likely to carry more weight than potential, or actual, contribution to culture.



(9) Think tanks make no pretensions about the ‘elitist’ pursuit of pure knowledge for its own sake. What matters is that their output should be, or rather be seen to be, ‘useful to society’.

In some cases, imputing to a think tank even so modest an aspiration as the generation of useful policy ideas may be overly romantic. Some think tanks produce output merely as a kind of exercise in self-assertion, or to justify their existence to their audience or their sponsors. “Look at us,” they are saying. “Look at the length of *our* publications list. We are clearly being very useful and important.”



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Looking over my recent posts, I see I may have been a little rude about think tanks [1]. Perhaps I appeared to imply that they compared unfavourably with academia. If so, then I need to correct that impression. Because, of course, modern academia has become largely indistinguishable from think tanks. Universities have abandoned academic objectivity and neutrality in favour of pursuing an ideological agenda. Or, more generally, in favour of whatever is expedient for purposes of gaining funding or promotion.

In modern academia:

- Pure quantity has become a key measure of productivity, regardless of whether the units being counted have any merit whatsoever.
- Quality has become impossible to assess since the underlying dodginess of any actual data is concealed, and because excess technicality creates an impenetrable cover.
- In any case, quality no longer matters much in practice; few people care, since it is tacitly accepted that the bulk of research serves no real purpose [2].
- *Pseudo-quality* is assessed mutually, by insiders rating one another. Like a system of NHS nurses giving one another gold stars, the most that can be said about the "best" is that they are probably not quite as awful as the "worst". (Though in many cases, a high rating simply reflects current fashion.)
- In a similar way to student intake, research positions are now offered partly on the basis of whether candidates comply with ideological requirements. Like any other form of redistribution, this apparent generosity to some who would previously been excluded has a cost: the exclusion of others who would previously have been *included*.
- ‘Usefulness to society’ has become a slogan, but in practice this is an inversion, since genuine usefulness — whether on a short or long term basis — is the last thing that concerns insiders.

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In February 09, after someone wrote to the Telegraph to argue that we should assume global warming is true because the effects of doing so are the ones we should want, I [suggested](#) that this attitude might be found among researchers themselves.

In some cases, this ideological bias — wanting research to support the creation of a ‘fairer’ world — may have effects only at the margin. For example, when a result is ambiguous, the choice of how to present it is made in the direction that is most supportive of the preferred belief system ... This is quite apart from the question of whether research goes on that deliberately falsifies its results in the direction most likely to be approved of. I have little doubt myself that this also happens; the only question is the extent to which it does.

Perhaps someone was paying attention, and felt inspired to do a little digging, because in November we were treated to a look at the inside workings of one of the components of the academic establishment, the University of East Anglia’s Climatic Research Unit. Were people surprised by the somewhat sordid revelations? But surely they did not think that the mediocratic tactic of giving up on old-fashioned standards in favour of expediency, and playing the power/money game, was something only bankers and MPs did. Regular readers of this blog will recognise Climategate as a perfect example of a familiar phenomenon. A paternalistic elite conceals or distorts information to manipulate its audience, on the basis that it knows best and that what it is doing increases ‘social justice’ [3].



The clandestine peek at the entrails of academia has been illuminating and useful. Now I am going to make a prediction about how much impact the scandal will ultimately have on the consensus about climate change. *None*.

I do not want to discourage those sceptics who are genuinely concerned with truth rather than politics, and who have no firm position themselves [4]. No doubt you should go on, fighting the good fight. But what ultimately counts is not what the blogosphere thinks, or even what the public (at the moment) thinks, but what people in power think [5]. And those people are, by a large majority, either convinced of the evidence for the human warming theory, or simply do not care about the niceties of evidence and just think we should assume it is true because doing so appears to legitimise what they regard as morally desirable actions.



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On one level, the hacked emails — looking beyond the veneer of superficial politeness — give one the feeling of having stumbled upon the interactions of a bunch of 13-year-olds [6].

“Hey, Jonesy.”

“Yo Micky.”

“Hear about Johnny — popped his clogs.”

“Yeah, cool. Those Blues are nuts, they got it coming.”

“Right on, man. Greens rule.”

“I’m tempted to beat the crap out of that Pat.”

“Is he still out there? Someone should seriously deck him.”

“Yeah. Hear about Sonia trying to get on the school honours board?”

“No way man, we need to stop that. I’ll fix it with Kevin to get that blocked.”

“We gonna destroy those Blues.”

“Yeah. Anyone who supports them will get beaten up or I’ll fix it with the Head to give them detention for a year!”

“By the way, the results for the play-offs have come in, and they’re crap. It’s a travesty we aren’t higher in the table. I don’t think we should release the results yet, it’s dirty laundry.”

“Don’t worry, we can truncate the data to stop our worst losses showing up. I know this cool trick which will hide the decline.”

“Fantastic, let’s do that.”

“Did you get asked to approve submissions for the school mag?”

“Yeah. One of them, by a Blue, disses my poem from the last issue. What a prat! I really went to town on the guy’s essay, if it appears I’ll be really surprised.”

“Confidentially, Jonesy, I need help rejecting a submission from a Blue which I’ve been asked to approve.”

“OK, today. Promise. Kevin and I will keep stuff by Blues out – even if we have to redefine the school mag’s policy. If necessary, we’ll get the prefects to boycott it.”

The whole sorry saga might almost be comical, were it not for the fact that what lies bleeding on the floor is academic neutrality, detachment, disinterestedness, and so forth. All those things which once put university research on a higher level than that of consultancies, corporate back rooms, or policy wonks.

It is of course a question of degree. It is not that scientists as a group were ever as purist as one might ideally like. Historical evidence suggests that applying selectivity to data may on occasion even be helpful to the discovery process. It is simply that the modern academic institutional environment brings out the worst in this respect. It is certainly *not* the case, as we are encouraged to believe, that this environment, with its system of quality-control-by-peer-approval, guarantees that minimum standards of objectivity and fair play are observed, let alone that any actual progress is made.

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There seems little reason not to assume that the research style and ethics evident at CRU is representative of academia in general, not just climatology. That seems to have been Professor Jones's general line of defence to the Commons committee (and the line taken by his apologists). Things he and his colleagues did, which may have appeared dodgy to outsiders, are merely "standard practice".

I felt I should dig out the following quote from [last year’s posts](#), where I responded to someone’s suggestion that current academia places too much emphasis on conscientiousness, and not enough on wild, free, idiot-savant-style creativity.

conscientiousness is not something I would have said particularly distinguishes the modern academic ... Academic output may look stunningly diligent – partly because of its high level of technicality –

but dig a little deeper and you find that cutting corners and sloppiness are as prevalent in academia as in the modern ethos generally.

Old-fashioned diligence is a tad ‘gay’, don’t you know. So much more manly to maintain your office at such a level of [chaos](#) that you couldn’t tell your charts from your elbow, let alone find a crucial data set.

It is, incidentally, less than pointless to single out the hapless Jones and Mann for attack. They are probably model academics by the going standard. If you ran a check on the emails of every academic institution, considerably more shocking things would no doubt come to light. The attempt to make scapegoats of Jones et al should be resisted; it is a standard mediocratic evasion tactic. (Allow the collective to identify an individual or two as the supposedly isolated rotten apples, ruining their lives in the process, as though that somehow cleansed the Augean stables of their entire load of horse manure.)

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The development of an internal politics which means that progress within a discipline becomes a matter of whom you know, rather than what you know, is linked to the presence of ideological pressures such as the global warming creed, but it is not dependent on such pressures.

Clearly some subjects have more obvious focal points, where there appears to be a ‘correct’ answer, than others. In these cases, the paradigm which becomes dominant will be relatively predictable, and the dominant power group which blocks out rivals will be associated with that position. In other subjects, the precise intellectual position of the dominant coalition will be more arbitrary. In [stem cell research](#), for example, where a few brave souls recently dared to complain about the self-perpetuating behaviour of *that* subject’s dominant party, the position associated with the party seems to be arbitrary as far as one can tell, and not determined by any particular political or moral bias [7].

The institutional factors which lead to disciplines becoming self-referential — to the point that, were one able to look at the internal processes leading up to the public image of glossy journal articles, academic prizes and all the rest, one would (if one were not yet desensitised by mediocracy) experience hair-raising horror — were briefly discussed by me in an [earlier post](#).

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The fundamental reasons for the transformation of academia into a factory for producing ersatz research on a sort of conveyor-belt model, with anything that deviates in the wrong way from accepted paradigms being effectively



blocked, are diverse, but can mostly be linked to mediocracy themes. In the broadest sense, these can be seen as derived from a kind of collectivism: asserting that culture is a group activity, not dependent on exceptional ability, and insisting that individuals be subordinate to the will of the collective.

Among *external* pressures, market forces were until recently most often tipped as the villain, though this had little basis in reality. By now, even the most anti-market ideologues among academics find it difficult to avoid the fact that far more obvious pressures are being exerted by the state. Kenneth Minogue commented on these in 2001.

[State subsidy] is the first step towards state control ... By the 1990s, universities were unmistakably merely a part of a comprehensive state system of instruction for those above eighteen years of age. They were inspected and controlled as such ... The new system of 'academic audits' mechanised undergraduate teaching, and a similar homogenisation has been promoted by the research councils in graduate studies. Independent reflection gets crowded out. [8]

One of the reasons why the state's encroachment on academia has progressed so rapidly is, as Minogue pointed out, the "supine response of the dons themselves". Take the 'participation' issue. New Labour has bullied the universities for years to generate more proportional representation across the social classes in their student intake. One obvious reaction might have been to tell the government where to go, particularly given that its demand rests on the unsound assumption that there is no inherited component to ability — an assumption which of course is rarely spelt out. Instead, the almost universal response has been of the kind "please sir, we have been trying as hard as we can to get more working-class/state-school/etc. students in, honest." [9]

As far as research funding is concerned, the pressures of the state are similar to those of any Big Client with ideological preferences who wants to see 'value for money'. The incentive to generate the right kind of research, with implications that will not upset Big Client, creeps insidiously into the system of research bodies, umbrella organisations, funding committees, vice-chancellors, governing bodies, lead researchers and so forth, until people barely notice they are being bought and sold like so much cattle. If Big Client does not like the answers one scientist is giving, it can just [sack him](#) and get another.

The biases in the money-bestowing process will of course be largely unwritten. They arise in practice as a result of the unstated but well-known prejudices of individuals (e.g. within funding bodies such as ESRC) rather than due to any explicitly formalised rules. It is not going to be written in any document: preference will be given to applicants whose work will suggest that climate trends are such as to require government intervention. Nevertheless, everyone — except perhaps a few naively idealistic souls, who quickly fall by the wayside — will know the deal and play the game accordingly.

Ultimately, however, the more important pressures leading to the destruction of the

academic are not external. They are those of mediocratic ideology, which largely originate from inside the academy itself. When the Principal of one of the top Oxbridge colleges [asserts](#), apparently on the basis not of research but preferred belief, that “initial genetic endowment is pretty much random across social classes”, the case for resisting pressure from the state about admissions is clearly undermined. But denial of genes is not the only academic contribution to anti-academic ideology.

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In part 2 of this article, we shall be looking at the key ideological themes which have driven debasement of academia to the level of think tanks, and beyond.

Meanwhile, let me leave readers with this thought. Now you have seen an example of what lies behind the facade of academic certainty. On the theatre stage: “there is no doubt about man-made global warming”. Behind the scenes: corner-cutting and under-carpet-sweeping on a scale that would put a dodgy Chinese catfood manufacturer to shame. Consider this: What about all those other claims of doubtlessness made by various academic disciplines? In philosophy, for example, dualism is said to be debunked. In psychology, a form of behaviourism is de rigueur. In biology, we are told that the theory of evolution has a lot of supporting evidence [10]. In physics, there is supposedly no possible alternative to Heisenberg uncertainty and the rest of the quantum theory apparatus. I can think of many other examples where research is said to have 'established' something or other. How much confidence do you think should now be placed on such positions being justified by reference to old-fashioned standards of academic rigour?

*Oxford Forum is a research organisation which was set up to oppose declining standards and increasing ideological bias in mainstream academia. Its aim is to expand into an independent college cum university which would generate and publish research in several areas including philosophy, the psychology and physiology of perception, and theoretical physics. We are actively seeking potential patrons to provide funding for its activities [11].*

- The title of this post is not intended to imply that I necessarily think British academia is any worse than, say, American or Italian.

- Sources for the quotes at the top of the post are [here](#) and [here](#).

The Guardian says that Kamel "was leaving academic science" and that he "never tried to publish [his research] elsewhere". Well, is it likely he would, with the kind of review he would have got from Jones? What is not explained is *why* Kamel left academic science. Perhaps there were other ostensible reasons, but can it have helped to find that producing what he thought was (and what probably is) important research was never going to be enough to form the basis of a career?

1. See posts from [July](#) and [August](#).

2. My reading of the inclusion in a [key IPCC report](#) of 'data' loosely based on a sentence in a World Wildlife Fund publication from two years earlier, itself repeating a speculation reported in the New Scientist six years before that, is that it is akin to a Freudian slip: it probably reveals underlying attitudes. If vigilance about keeping pseudo-data out of the academic debate appears to be low, this is not necessarily due to mediocracy per se but because it is realised that the reliability of current academic research is actually on a par with the

trustworthiness of anecdotal data reported in popular magazines.

Incidentally, [this article](#) on the issue seems decidedly biased and rather like a PR whitewash exercise. I have noted a Wikipedia bias in this area [previously](#). Note to administrators: you need to get your act together on this one, guys. NPOV rating: 2/10.

3. I do not mean to suggest that the motives here are necessarily benevolent. More simply, we can postulate that deceiving/manipulating people is a satisfying expression of power, and in this case just happens to be regarded as semi-legitimate. This is in addition to any financial incentives offered by state funding bodies to generate the 'right' answers.

4. The truth — whatever that may turn out to be. Truth can be fuzzy, particularly in climatology, and especially once you stop trying to impose a preferred theory on the data. It may of course be that the greenhouse camp have it roughly right, but it is now surely clear that we can no longer assume they do, simply on the basis of the “overwhelming evidence” which is said to exist even without CRU. Here’s a simple mindbender: if you take a sample of one apple from a population of 20 and find it is rotten, how safe is it to assume that more than half the others are good to eat? Answer: not very.

5. By "people in power" I am of course talking about those who control or otherwise significantly influence the media, as well as those putatively in charge in Westminster or Brussels.

6. Needless to say, this is not the real thing but a parody, loosely based on the actual emails, copies of which currently seem to be residing at [eastangliaemails.com](#). In writing this article I drew on predigestive research by [Andrew Montford](#) and [Fred Pearce](#).

7. In referring to bravery I am being semi-ironic. No doubt it takes some gumption to complain even when you have a couple of "internationally renowned" experts on your side, although their presence is unlikely to be sufficient for the challenge to have much effect. With the complaints being dismissed by heavyweights *Nature* and *Science*, it looks as if the whole thing will quickly slide into obscurity. When even a couple of prestigious supporters are insufficient to prevent complaints being pooh-poohed, can you imagine what would happen if a group of junior academics, probably already tainted by being at second-tier institutions, where they would have been forced to settle due to being associated with unfashionable ideas or topics, were to make a complaint against the great and good of their subject *without* any senior supporters?

8. 'The collapse of the academic in Britain', from *Buckingham at 25*, IEA 2001.

9. The only significant exception to this bending-over-backwards approach that I can recall was the [President of Trinity College's](#) demand in 2004 to “keep the tanks off our lawns”.

10. Now that one really is a joke. I am not advocating intelligent design as an alternative — one of the tactics of the MA (mediocratic academia) crowd is to force debates into crude dichotomies — but to suggest the standard theory of evolution has a few holes is a little like saying Norway has a couple of fjords.

11. Those who are unable to contribute financially can help in other ways. (Of course, if [every salaried academic](#) in the UK donated an average of £100 per annum, Oxford Forum would be adequately set up, for starters at least. Most would not even have to be out of pocket on the exercise if they reduced, by an equivalent amount, other donations that in practice are probably financing arms deals or child abuse.)

Buying our books, all of which are available, and in stock, from Book Systems Plus via Amazon, helps.

So does giving us links or other kinds of publicity. The latter point is aimed particularly at academics who may think it is a wheeze to use our ideas as the basis for (e.g.) magazine articles. One doesn't expect ethical behaviour from journalists, but those receiving a salary for doing research might at least observe the niceties of acknowledging input, and do so *more* in the case of fellow academics unfairly deprived of status and salary, not less.

Coming to [Cuddesdon](#) to work for us for a week or more in the vacations would also give us a boost in our efforts.