

Vol. 12, No. 2 – January 20, 2010

Off with his head!

“All that is required for evil to prevail is for good men [and women] to do nothing.” Edmund Burke

Lewis Carroll painted a vivid portrait of power and intolerance run rampant in his depiction of the Queen of Hearts yelling “Off with her head!” anytime anyone disagreed with her. But the Queen of Hearts has nothing on the Commonwealth Foundation and other global warming deniers, and they are yelling for Penn State University’s Michael Mann’s head.

This version of the global warming deniers’ alternative universe starts with a massive theft. Thousands of emails and documents from the computer servers at the Climate Research Unit (CRU) of the University of East Anglia in the UK, one of the main repositories of information about global warming, were stolen and selectively uploaded from a Russian computer to a climate skeptic website. And despite the fact that over 95 percent of the CRU climate data set concerning land surface temperatures has been accessible for several years, the deniers insist that the emails prove a vast left-wing conspiracy.

Pulling words out of context from a handful of the emails to distort their meaning and imply dishonest motives by climate researchers, the deniers have dubbed this issue “Climategate,” and called for the wholesale rejection of all the peer-reviewed scientific papers that have come from the CRU and affiliated researchers. CRU has instituted a complete investigation and patiently explained every implied inference and question from the stolen and selectively released emails. The director of the CRU has stepped aside to protect the unit until that investigation is complete, and there is an ongoing police investigation to determine who hacked into the system and why.

In the U.S., climate skeptics have attacked individual scientists and questioned their ethics. They have launched a vicious attack on Dr. Michael E. Mann, Professor of Meteorology with a Joint Appointment with the Department of Geosciences and Director, Earth System Science Center at Penn State University. He was a lead author of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Third Scientific Assessment Report, and has served as chair for the National Academy of Sciences ‘Frontiers of Science’. He is author of more than 120 peer-reviewed and edited publications, and recently co-authored the book “Dire Predictions: Understanding Global Warming” with colleague Lee Kump. He is also a co-founder and avid contributor to the award-winning science website “RealClimate.org”.

Mann is not the kind of person to take these attacks lying down. When former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin penned an Op-Ed in the *Washington Post* claiming “The e-mails reveal that leading climate ‘experts’ . . . manipulated data to ‘hide the

decline’ in global temperatures,” Mann responded with his own Op-Ed, refuting all of her contentions. When the *Washington Times* and others attacked his credibility, Mann stood up for the research and the researchers.

The outcry from the deniers led Penn State University (PSU) to conduct its own investigation into Mann’s research, a standard policy anytime a PSU professor’s research is questioned. The results are due by the end of the month.

None of these attacks has resulted in any serious questioning of the science behind global warming, and Dr. Mann has not retracted any of his work. Instead, he has continued to defend the science on global warming, and to call for immediate action to significantly reduce emissions of heat-trapping gases.

And it’s just this kind of “insolence” that has brought out the inner Queen of Hearts in the Commonwealth Foundation. “How dare he,” one could hear the Queen fume. “Off with his head!”

The Commonwealth Foundation held a press conference at the state capitol to call for another investigation (even before the others are finished), this time by the Pennsylvania General Assembly. That call, so far, has been met with silence, just as the attempt to muddy the scientific waters with the stolen and selectively quoted emails has been. This is making the deniers even more furious, and acting even more like the Queen.

All of this would be amusing, if the problem weren’t so serious. The scientific consensus is clear – climate change is accelerating because of humans’ impact on the environment, particularly our reliance on energy made from coal and oil. Pennsylvania is a major contributor to the problem, and we need to be a major part of the solution. Scientists who are working to identify both the problem and the solutions deserve to be thanked, not pilloried, and good people need to break their silence and launch a defense as vigorous as the attack on Michael Mann, and accepted climate science.

Michael Mann has actually spoken highly of the need for skepticism. “Skepticism in the truest scientific sense of the word is good and is indeed essential to science. Skepticism should not be confused, however, with contrarianism that does not meet the basic standards of scientific inquiry.”

Hardly words deserving the guillotine, no matter what the Queen wants.

PennFuture Facts is available for reprint; authors are available for print or broadcast interviews.