

Griffin - NASA chief silenced

Michael Griffin aired his doubts about climate-change politics on National Public Radio. Under a barrage of criticism, he recanted

Lawrence Solomon, Financial Post

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The head of NASA -- the National Aeronautical and Space Association--is "an idiot" and "in denial." He is also "surprisingly naive" and "a fool." With his judgment and competence so lacking, demands abound for his resignation as head of the largest and most accomplished science agency in the world.

Those comments and others in the past week have come from scientists shocked to learn that NASA chief Michael Griffin thinks differently than they about global warming. Among the most shocked is one of Dr. Griffin's own employees, James Hansen, a top climate scientist who "almost fell off my chair" when he learned that his research hadn't convinced his boss. "It's an incredibly arrogant and ignorant statement," he told ABC News, referring to an interview of Dr. Griffin on National Public Radio. "It indicates a complete ignorance of understanding the implications of climate change."

Some might think Dr. Griffin is entitled to think for himself. Apart from his PhD in aerospace engineering, he holds five masters degrees, he is a member of the National Academy of Engineering and the International Academy of Astronautics, he manages a US\$1.1-billion climate-research budget and was unanimously confirmed to head NASA by the United States Senate.

But no. He is either "totally clueless" or "a deep anti-global warming ideologue," concludes Jerry Mahlman, a scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, in a statement similar to many.

Dr. Griffin's radio interview drew this storm of controversy after he was asked about the seriousness of global warming. He replied by saying, "I am not sure that it is fair to say that it is a problem we must wrestle with. To assume that it is a problem is to assume that the state of Earth's climate today is the optimal climate, the best climate that we could have or ever have had, and that we need to take steps to make sure that it doesn't change."

Dr. Griffin doesn't dispute that the Earth has been warming. He does dispute that we can -- or even should -- do anything about it. "First of all, I don't think it's within the power of human beings to assure that the climate does not change, as millions of years of history have shown. And second of all, I guess I would ask which human beings, where and when, are to be accorded the privilege of deciding that this particular climate that we have right here today, right now, is the best climate for all other human beings. I'm, I think that's a rather arrogant position for people to take."

Dr. Griffin's interview was prompted by criticisms from environmental journalist Greg Easterbrook, who charged that Dr. Griffin is wasting NASA's time and money on misguided space exploration projects, such as a manned mission to Mars and the establishment of a permanent base on the moon. Instead, Easterbrook argued, Dr. Griffin should be exercising his right to free speech, coming out against misguided NASA policies and spending more on legitimate priorities, such as greater global-warming research.

The Easterbrook charge led National Public Radio to ask Dr. Griffin why he wasn't "battling [global warming] as an army might battle an enemy." Dr. Griffin's response: "Nowhere in NASA's

authorization, which of course governs what we do, is there anything at all telling us that we should take actions to effect climate change in either -- in one way or another.... NASA is not an agency chartered to, quote, 'battle climate change.' "

More howls from critics, who believe Dr. Griffin should be using his discretion to skew NASA's mission away from its core purpose -- and away from his fiduciary responsibilities to his organization -- and toward the service of fighting climate change.

To which Dr. Griffin responds, not unreasonably, "The question is, in a democratic society, who gets to choose. Unfortunately for Greg, it's not him."

Unfortunately for society, Greg Easterbrook happened to be wrong in another claim: that Dr. Griffin hadn't lost his right to speak out. For all intents and purposes, he has. Within days of the uproar, Dr. Griffin decided that he should not have discussed "an issue which has become far more political than technical." In an apology to his staff, he said, "I feel badly that I caused this amount of controversy over something like this," adding that, "it would have been well for me to have stayed out of it."

Dr. Griffin is now one more scientist who will not dispute the existence of a "scientific consensus on global warming."

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CV OF A DENIER

Prior to heading NASA, Michael Griffin served as space department head at Johns Hopkins University's applied physics laboratory in Laurel, Md. He was previously president and chief operating officer of In-Q-Tel, Inc. and chief executive of Orbital Sciences Corporation's Magellan Systems division. Earlier, Dr. Griffin served as chief engineer and as associate administrator for exploration at NASA, and as deputy for technology at the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization. He is the lead author of more than two dozen technical papers, as well as the textbook Space Vehicle Design. He earned his doctorate at the Michael Griffin University of Maryland.