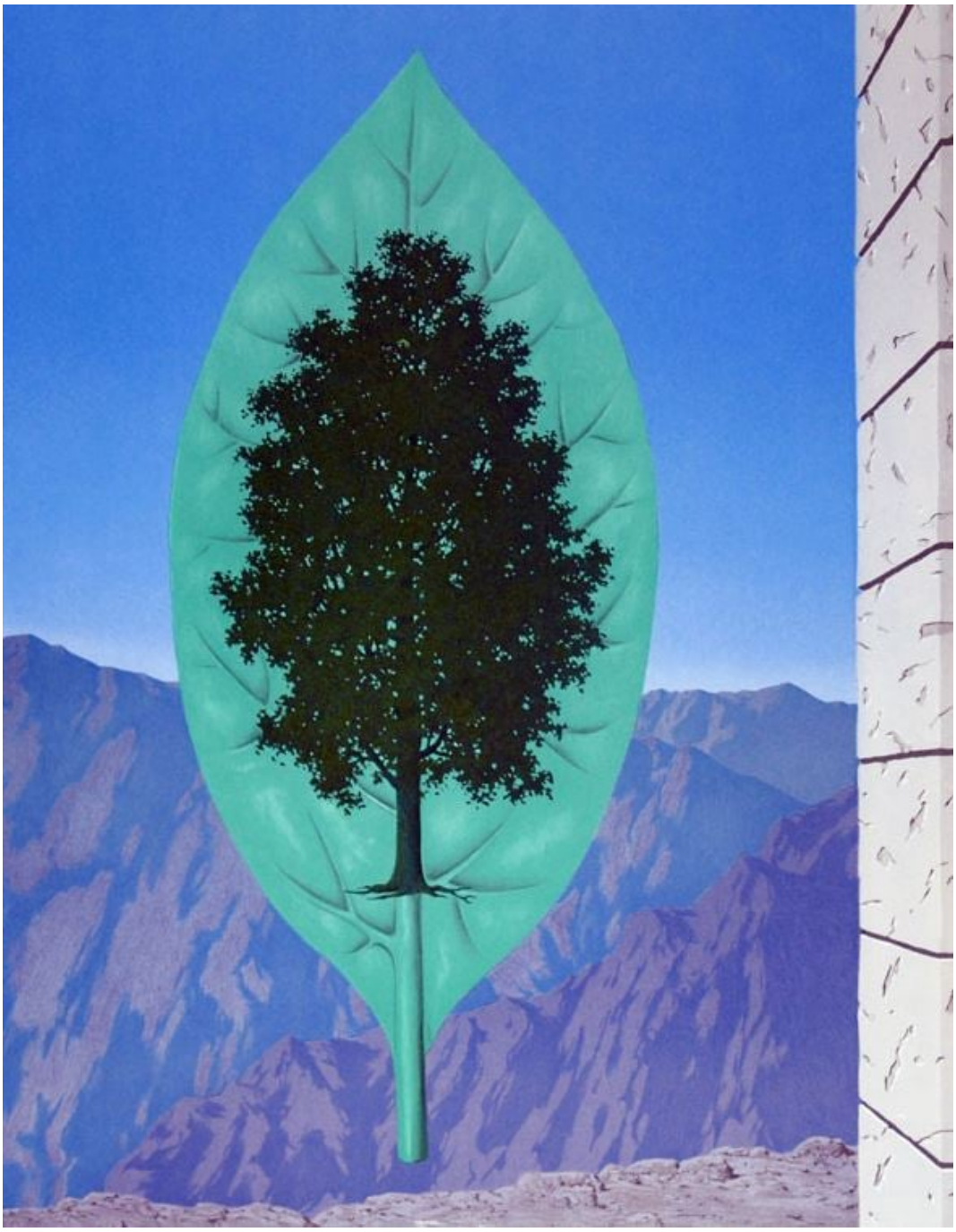
Unsettled Science: Covid, Net Zero and the Corruption of Debate

by Patrick Keeney (October 2025)



The Last Word (René Magritte, 1967)

> *The really important thing is to try and make opinion increasingly responsible to the facts. There can be no liberty for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies. Trite as the conclusion may at first seem, it has, I believe, immense practical consequences…*
> —Walter Lippmann

Writing almost one hundred years ago, Walter Lippmann's admonition about the indispensability of facts for liberty finds a grim echo in our own time, where even the very institutions charged with producing and testing those facts are faltering. The American physicist Lawrence Krauss, in his edited anthology *The War on Science*, recently issued a chilling warning about the state of our intellectual institutions: "Universities and science institutions in the West are unfortunately no longer guaranteed to be places where the free and open exchange of ideas is encouraged, nor where scientific progress can be carried out unhindered by ideology."

That our critical, truth-seeking institutions teeter on the brink, prioritizing ideology over free inquiry, is a threat that extends beyond academia; it weakens society's ability to understand itself honestly. Without the freedom to question, doubt, and dissent, progress stalls.

His words expose a deep betrayal of purpose. Universities and scientific institutions, once havens for truth-seeking, have become ideological echo chambers, prioritizing orthodoxy over inquiry. When conformity takes hold, the corruption of knowledge quickly ensues.

This insight draws on ancient wisdom. Two thousand years ago, Confucius said that if given political power, his first action would be to "rectify the language." He understood that a society's health relies on honest discourse: when words are

distorted or lose their meaning, thinking becomes corrupted, and governance and knowledge suffer. The distortion of speech inevitably causes the distortion of reason itself. When language is used for propaganda rather than truth, words lose their enlightening power and become tools of coercion.

The Climate Debate: From Science to Slogan

Nowhere is the corruption of language more apparent than in climate discourse. What began as "global warming," based on measurable facts, has evolved into the broader term "climate change," and has further intensified into the moral panic of "climate crisis" and "climate emergency." This linguistic inflation is not harmless. The media's relentless apocalyptic tone suppresses debate. Questioning the "crisis" risks being labelled a "denier," a term that evokes Holocaust denial, framing any dissent as moral wickedness rather than honest disagreement.

As Krauss warns, ideology distorts scientific language into a tool for political manipulation: words used for propaganda become ritualistic chants. For example, the phrase "the science is settled" conflicts with science's nature as an ongoing process of hypothesis testing and error correction. In climate debates, it suppresses the skepticism vital to genuine science. Additionally, notice the mischievous use of the definite article—the—as if there were a singular, univocal science, a monolith speaking with one voice rather than what science truly is: a diverse, provisional, and contested enterprise. Science is an ever-unfinished conversation in which hypotheses are tested, rival interpretations collide, and knowledge advances only through the friction of doubt and dissent.

Canada's Net Zero policies, codified in the Canadian *Net-Zero Emissions Accountability Act* (2021), claim to rely on "the

best scientific information available," but what constitutes the "best" is neither self-evident nor universally accepted. Built upon IPCC models, which have been criticized for, among other things, overstating warming and eliding uncertainties, Net Zero is presented not as a prudential policy choice open to democratic deliberation but as a moral imperative beyond question. Critics warn that beneath the rhetoric of necessity lie exaggerated claims, economic costs projected to reach as high as $2 trillion by 2050—nearly three-quarters of Canada's GDP in 2021—and devastating job losses in the energy sector. The vocabulary of *"climate emergency"* functions here not to illuminate trade-offs but to sanctify sacrifice, casting skepticism as heresy.

The Pandemic: A Rehearsal in Linguistic Control

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare how language itself was conscripted into the service of power, its corruption advancing governmental aims under the guise of necessity.

Governments claimed to "follow the science," but the phrase served more as a political shield than a true reflection of empirical methods. Science provides provisional judgments, subject to falsification and revision; instead, what was presented were sweeping edicts, sanctified by the guise of expertise but resistant to scrutiny. Dissenting voices—such as respected epidemiologists Jay Bhattacharya, Sunetra Gupta, and Martin Kulldorff—were not genuinely engaged but condemned. Their careful warnings about lockdowns and school closures were swiftly branded as "misinformation," a verdict aimed not despite their expertise but to silence it. Anthony Fauci's notoriously foolish statement, "I represent the science," exemplified this distortion: transforming science from a humble pursuit of inquiry into an oracle of dogma.

What was truly happening? By invoking an abstract "science,"

policymakers could avoid accountability for value-based choices, as if lockdowns, mask mandates, or vaccine passports were neutral facts rather than controversial political decisions with significant social impacts. “Following the science“ was the preferred mantra that promised objectivity but, in reality, suppressed debate and justified extraordinary government powers. It disguised complex, value-driven judgments as if they were impartial, objective truths—delivered not by fallible humans but by a supposedly impartial tribunal called “The Science.“

This rhetorical manoeuvre justified sweeping mandates under the guise of inevitability, silencing dissent with slogans that allowed no disagreement. The language itself served as the enforcement tool. “The science is settled,” or “Trust the science,” turned healthy scepticism, central to scientific inquiry, into a moral failing. Ultimately, the phrase so loved by politicians— “we are following the science” —absolves officials of responsibility for political decisions by invoking a supposedly neutral, external authority. To question such phrases was to risk being branded a science “denier” or accused of “misinformation.” Each slogan thus functioned not as a contribution to debate but as a linguistic barricade against scepticism, informed deliberation, or nuance.

In Canada, such language was used to justify prolonged lockdowns—measures now widely criticised for their disproportionate economic and social damage compared to their uncertain health benefits. “The science” became a shield against accountability, turning the debate from one of conflicting scientific perspectives into one of compliance. Canadians witnessed, in real time, a timeless truth: when language is corrupted, it ceases to convey truth and instead becomes a tool for government power.

The pandemic employed the same linguistic tactics now used in climate policy. The parallels are striking. Tim Ball demonstrates how the terminology used in climate debate—such

as “settled science” or “consensus”—was never a scientific fact but a political tactic. It limits inquiry into the climate to a single factor, CO_2, while ignoring opposing evidence.

Bjørn Lomborg, author of *False Alarm: How Climate Change Panic Costs us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet*, has observed that framing the debate around CO_2 systematically excludes considerations of proportionality and cost-benefit analysis: vast amounts of resources are directed towards small emissions reductions with minimal climate impact, while much more pressing issues like poverty, malnutrition, accessibility to clean water, and disease remain underfunded.

In both pandemics and climate debates, we observe the same epistemic corruption: the transformation of science from an open-ended method of inquiry into a closed canon of certainty, enforced through language. Once “settled,” science ceases to regulate power; instead, it becomes its servant.

The DOE Report: Challenging the Consensus

The U.S. Department of Energy’s *A Critical Review of Impacts of Greenhouse Gas Emissions on the U.S. Climate* (July 29, 2025), directly questions the “consensus” underpinning Net Zero. It concludes that U.S. policy actions are likely to have “undetectably small” effects on the global climate, and that the costs of aggressive mitigation might outweigh the benefits.

Among its other key findings:

- Climate models “run hot,” overstating warming.

- Extreme weather trends show little worsening over the past century.
- CO_2 benefits plant growth and agriculture.

The report's cautious tone sharply contrasts with the alarmist language often seen in public discussions. While politicians and media figures frequently shout about imminent disaster, the authors of this report speak with the calm seriousness typical of science—acknowledging uncertainties, emphasising the tentative nature of current understanding, and reminding us that the future is not set but remains uncertain.

Against the backdrop of "climate crisis," the report notes that CO_2-induced warming appears to be less economically damaging than previously believed, and that the heavily promoted link between emissions and environmental disasters is much more fragile than the rhetoric suggests. In fact, the findings imply that aggressive mitigation policies, which require trillions in spending and significant social upheaval, may not only be ineffective but also fundamentally misguided.

The importance of these findings is significant. If warming is real but not catastrophic, and if humanity continues to adapt as it has in the past, then the case for Net Zero weakens. By avoiding apocalyptic hyperbole, the DOE review encourages a more balanced discussion. It redirects us to a more human perspective—considering costs and benefits, uncertainties, and trade-offs—rather than locking public policy into an all-or-nothing stance that emphasises either salvation or disaster.

Predictably, climate campaigners did not view it as part of a scientific debate but rather as heresy that had to be eradicated. What stood out was the lack of genuine engagement with the report's data and reasoning. Instead, the criticisms revealed an unspoken assumption: that certain conclusions—specifically, that warming is universally

catastrophic and Net Zero is non-negotiable—must be accepted as fundamental truths, as articles of faith, regardless of opposing evidence. In this intellectual environment, questioning is regarded as an act of apostasy, and the duty to examine arguments is replaced by the instinct to denounce.

This atmosphere of enforced orthodoxy in climate discussion is what Steven Koonin (one of the authors of the report) criticizes in his book, *Unsettled: What Climate Science Tells Us, What it Doesn't, and Why it Matters*. A physicist and former science official in the Obama administration, Koonin acknowledges the impact of humans on the climate but highlights the significant uncertainties that still exist. Climate models often diverge from actual observations, making it challenging to definitively connect extreme weather events to greenhouse gases. Sea-level rise continues at a steady pace similar to historical patterns, rather than the accelerations frequently suggested.

His point is not to deny human-caused changes but to highlight the inherent complexity and uncertainty of climate science, concluding that the science of climate is neither "settled" nor sufficiently robust to dictate policy. What we face is not an existential crisis but a practical issue that calls for a pragmatic balance of costs and benefits. Koonin isn't undermining science but defending its core: the refusal to mistake provisional knowledge for final truth.

Yet, for speaking cautiously and using scientific language, Koonin is branded a heretic. Here, the corruption of language becomes evident: "uncertainty" is rebranded as "denial," methodological skepticism is portrayed as "misinformation," and the scientist who recognizes complexity is cast out as an apostate. Bjorn Lomborg, too, was caricatured as a "climate contrarian" for pointing out that the climate rhetoric often surpasses what the data support, even though he affirms anthropogenic warming and advocates for cautious responses. Tim Ball documented how skeptics attempting to uphold the

normal critical functions of science were “ruthlessly attacked, causing others to remain silent.”

In the climate debate, as with Covid, “science” is invoked—not as an open-ended method to seek truths about nature—but as a closed creed. As the DOE’s Review concluded, climate policy debates often rely on exaggerated scenarios and model outputs that differ from observational data; however, questioning these assumptions is frequently regarded as a betrayal. The semantic sleight of hand—turning provisional judgments into eternal truths, and dissent into sin—exposes less about the underlying science than about the cultural demand for certainty in a world of complexity.

The False Necessity of Net Zero in Canada

Canada’s Net Zero policy is also based on unsettled science. A Fraser Institute report, *“Canada’s Path to Net Zero by 2050: Darkness at the End of the Tunnel” (January 2025),* echoes the American DOE’s report, concluding that Canada cannot reach net-zero without transformative technology, as current abatement strategies fall short. It exposes the contentious scientific premises upon which Net Zero rests: inflated warming projections, ignoring humanity’s proven ability to adapt and overlooking the stark economic realities—chiefly the overwhelming energy costs that hit low-income Canadians hardest.

Presented as a moral obligation, Net Zero relies on contested science and requires emissions plans to be reviewed every five years. Even the most optimistic forecasts suggest only slight delays in warming—potentially just a few days by the century’s end—while costs rise into the trillions. As Bjørn Lomborg observes, such policies divert resources from urgent human needs—like poverty reduction, disease control, and access to clean water—causing unnecessary harm, especially to the

world’s poorest communities.

Net Zero also reveals how distorted language hides poor policy. The phrase sounds like an unavoidable, neutral scientific aim rather than a political slogan. Behind this idea is an energy approach that is, in fact, counterproductive. Western governments have committed to inefficient wind and solar projects, subsidized with huge public funds, while intentionally ignoring or shutting down much more reliable and affordable energy sources—natural gas, nuclear, and clean coal. The word “transition” disguises the reality of decline: rising energy costs, fragile grids, and decreasing competitiveness.

Meanwhile, China, grinning like a Cheshire cat, happily supplies the wind turbines and solar panels for the West’s symbolic crusade, all the while pursuing its own path with unembarrassed pragmatism. It is constructing nearly two massive coal-fired power plants a month, alongside some of the largest and most environmentally disruptive hydroelectric projects in human history. Beijing speaks the language of climate virtue abroad, but at home, it acts with ruthless clarity. The contrast could not be starker: a West entranced by slogans, and an East advancing by deeds. Here, the corruption of language becomes inseparable from strategic folly—proof that when ideology captures science, prudence is the first casualty.

When politicians invoke “the science is settled” to silence inquiry, they are mistaking provisional knowledge for final truth. Science flourishes only when it stays open—revising, questioning, testing, and humbly accepting uncertainty.

However, something in the human psyche craves certainty, and certainty fosters dogma. Problems that could be solved through practical investment in technology or innovation in energy policy are instead portrayed as apocalyptic battles, a Manichean battle of existential import, where hesitation is

seen as denial and recognizing complexity is dismissed as heresy.

The Return of Dogma and the Eclipse of Public Reason

The renowned philosopher of science Karl Popper argued that the essence of science lies in its critical spirit. Theories are never definitively proven; they are only continually tested through attempts at falsification. Progress relies not on consensus but on how effectively ideas endure relentless scrutiny. The strength of science is rooted in its tentativeness, its provisional and defeasible nature.

Yet in today's climate orthodoxy, these principles are reversed. Uncertainty is no longer seen as honesty but as heresy. The qualities that once set science apart from ideology—doubt, provisionality, contestation—are now viewed as forms of "denial."

This is not just a minor debate at the seminar table but a linguistic shift with serious political implications. When words are distorted, the very idea of truth becomes untrustworthy. Language, which should help clarify reality, is instead used as a tool to manipulate and dominate. Language then acts as a terminological guide meant to silence debate, infiltrating policy through bureaucratic statements. For example, reports from Environment and Climate Change Canada treat the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's findings as gospel, resistant to challenge, even though many of the panel's past projections—such as an ice-free Arctic by 2013, more intense hurricanes, and runaway warming—have quietly failed to happen. Instead of prompting re-evaluation, these failures are dismissed as "adjustments," leaving the core orthodoxy unchanged. The stance is less that of empirical science and more like theology defending its beliefs.

The DOE and Fraser reports challenge the notion that climate models are infallible and instead emphasize the provisional nature of science. They present the climate debate as a technical issue, reopening space for rational discussion. In doing so, they highlight the core of empirical inquiry: that theories are not final truths but hypotheses subject to ongoing testing.

The hostile reactions these reports have triggered show how much the climate debate has changed. Instead of inviting discussion, critics label disagreement as heresy—clearly showing ideological control, the very risk Lawrence Krauss warned about, as science becomes a tool for trends and dogma.

Conclusion: Restoring Reason

Language shapes the very world where politics and science take place. When words like “emergency” or “crisis” are used, they do more than describe reality; they foster an environment where dissent is seen as impiety and debate is replaced by obedience. In Canada, such language has been used to justify broad Net Zero commitments built on shaky grounds: exaggerated models, ignored uncertainties, and concealed economic costs.

This linguistic corruption not only distorts domestic debate but also weakens the West on the global stage. While our leaders recite the mantras of “climate emergency” and “energy transition,” China pushes forward with ruthless pragmatism—exporting wind turbines and solar panels to a credulous West while building coal plants and mega-dams at home. The result is a geopolitical inversion: we sacrifice resilience on the altar of slogans, while Beijing gains strength by ignoring them. Here, the corruption of language has become a form of strategic folly, demonstrating that bad words lead to bad policy, and bad policy results in a weakened civilization.

We must remember what science is: not a creed but a method. Scientific progress comes not from enforced consensus but from the clash of hypotheses and objections. When scientific uncertainty is labelled as denial, when skepticism is portrayed as misinformation, and when dissent is condemned as moral failure, rational discussion dissolves. Popper reminds us that science advances not by closing questions but by opening them. We must, as Kraus argues, renew the university as a sanctuary of truth and safeguard public discourse from being co-opted into ideological campaigns.

Resisting the linguistic distortions of the climate debate is not a licence for indifference, nor does it absolve us of our duty to be good stewards of the Earth. Valuing clarity of language and honesty about uncertainty is not denial but fidelity—to science, reason, and democracy itself. Caring for our shared home requires the courage to resist hysteria and the wisdom to act with balance, prudence, and a steadfast commitment to the truth.

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