



[March for Science in Portland, Oregon US](#) | [Another Believer](#) | Wikipedia | CC BY-SA 3.0

## When political fantasy trumps scientific fact

Julian Cribb

During the 1930s, around ten million Russians and Ukrainians starved to death in a horrific event known as *Holodomor*. Historians have attributed this disaster in part to the quack theories of Trofim Lysenko, Stalin's hand-picked boss of Soviet agricultural science. It was a disastrous case of politics distorting the objectivity of science, for its own ends.

Today, 'Lysenkoism' – the deliberate suppression of science by politics – is alive and kicking, not in totalitarian states, but in supposedly enlightened democracies such as the United States and Australia.

In its course, scientists in both countries are being purged, intimidated, their funding axed, their institutions dismembered and their findings suppressed – all because the objective scientific evidence they discover doesn't support the political delusions of ruling elites and their corporate masters.

The aim is to keep the well-evidenced facts of climate change out of the media and public eye by choking off the flow of trustworthy information. The method is simple: shoot the messenger. In the case of Lysenko, some 3000 Russian biologists, including the great Nikolai Vavilov, were persecuted, purged, forced to recant their science, sent to the Gulag or in some cases, actually shot.

Trofim Lysenko was an obscure Ukrainian plant breeder who rejected Mendelian genetic theory, and claimed he could revolutionise agriculture by transmitting superior acquired traits from one generation of wheat to the next. With the USSR facing crop failure and



widening hunger, his claims impressed the leadership of the Communist party, including Stalin, who appointed him director of Genetics for the Academy of Sciences. From this power base, Lysenko began systematically to eliminate his rivals – all those who adhered to the science of genetics.

Cunningly, he invited scientists to speak at prestigious conferences, then purged all whose views departed from his own. This set back the delivery of improved crop varieties, which could have prevented starvation, by a generation or more. Not until the mid-1960s did the USSR cut itself loose from Lysenko's crank theories, and food self-sufficiency began to recover.

Today, public-spirited scientists in America and Australia are being purged for similar reasons – for speaking out about the evidenced truths of science in the face of right wing politics which denies those truths and wants them stamped out.

In the US, Trump is in the process of:

- Drastic cuts to science funding
- Placing his own 'Lysenkos' at the head of key Federal agencies and departments
- Abandoning the US commitment to the world plans to limit greenhouse emissions
- Revoking Obama's measures to prepare America for climate change
- Applying political censorship to the public science statements of government departments and agencies
- Deleting public advice about climate change and US carbon emissions from government websites.

His main instrument of enforcement is a \$7 billion cut to the science budget affecting, among others, the US National Science Foundation, the Environment Protection Agency, the National Oceans and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA), NASA, the Department of Energy, the US Geological Survey, the Departments of Agriculture and of Energy, all of which are involved either in climate science, environmental or renewable energy research.

"Make no mistake: these numbers would be crippling to much of the federal science apparatus," Matt Hourihan, director of budget and policy at the American Association for the Advancement of Science [commented](#).

Drinking from the same stagnant well of anti-science, Australia's LNP government has overseen the purging of CSIRO climate and water scientists and the closure of its atmospheric research division, as well as ongoing moves to cut down renewable energy funding and science, delaying tactics over climate action and ongoing efforts to open up new sources of carbon pollution such as the Adani mine and gas extraction.

Redundancies at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority – significantly in its climate change group – suggest that coral science is also on the hit-list, as the Government moves to suppress public discussion of the devastation to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. A new twist is the proposal of ‘technofixes’ –like pumping cold water onto tiny parts of the Reef - with little or no real impact, but providing a political smokescreen to justify continued inaction and fossil fuels development.

Commenting on the Turnbull Government’s recent science statement, Dr. Peter Tangney of Finders University [lamented](#) “the current government’s track record of endorsing scientific research and promoting investment only when it is politically expedient to do so, and ignoring or seeking to discredit science when it is not.”

Ordinary people are sometimes amazed at the ease with which politicians lie about issues like climate change. The answer is that, in the heightened adversarial context of today’s politics, the only ‘truth’ many of today’s diminutive politicians acknowledge is political expediency – not facts.

The problem with scientific facts is they cannot be manipulated or discarded quite as easily as political ‘truths’. They are supported by hard evidence –often truckloads of it– by peer review, and by scientists making confirmatory findings all around the planet. Faced with such solid certainties, the recourse of desperate politicians is now to shoot the messenger, to try to intimidate or shut down public good science and gag it when it tries to warn us about what is really happening to our planet.

Lysenkoism was the manifestation of a Soviet political delusion that ended up costing millions of lives. The historical irony is that the same sort of irrational, ideology-based delusion has now captured Australia’s Liberal and America’s Republican parties.

Climate denial is a contemporary political fantasy that will cost billions of lives, in the famines, disasters, refugee tsunamis and wars that will accompany an unchecked 4-5 degree rise in global temperatures by 2100. No intelligent government on the planet supports it – only the blindly irresponsible.

It is time we all stood up for our scientists. They are only trying to serve society by giving us the facts. We may not like the truths they deliver – but suppressing them will not make those facts less real.

On Earth Day, [April 22](#), there were protests across America and Australia and around the world in defence of science. Over 600 communities took part to speak up for reason and rationality in the face of the politicians’ denialism and suppression. On April 29, the [People’s Climate Movement](#) provides another opportunity to support a vision for a future that protects our families, our communities, and the climate –to speak for our grandkids, who otherwise will pay the price of the current ruinous leadership.

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