Power to the People: Science Stands at the People's Climate March

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The People’s Climate March on the 21st September 2014 was organised and designed to galvanise popular support for the United Nations Climate Summit being held in New York on the 23rd September 2014. The event was massive, with hundreds of groups, and hundreds of thousands of people, participating in the event. 400,000 people joined the parade in New York. The People’s Climate March was supported by hundreds of other companion events around the world, calling for climate action.

The People’s Climate March had Whitman-esque multitudes. In attendance, there was an amazing inclusive diversity of groups and causes. Bill McKibben and the 350.org fossil fuel divestment movement played a key role in organising the event. The environmental organisation the Sierra Club—led by Michael Brune—were present. Al Gore’s Climate Reality movement was prominent in the People’s Climate March. Anti-fracking activists—particularly from New
York—were in abundance. There were armies of students and youth activists, pushing for recognition of intergenerational climate justice. Indigenous groups at the front-lines of climate change led the march.

A group of elders marched at the event. Former Irish President and United Nation Human Rights Commissioner, Mary Robinson, and former Norwegian President and leader of the World Health Organization, Gro Harlem Brundtland, were in attendance. There were a range of celebrities supporting climate action—including Mark Ruffalo, Leonardo di Caprio, and Ed Norton. United States political leaders—like Senator Sheldon Whitehouse—featured in the event. International leaders like United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, and the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, Christiana Figueres, also joined the march.

I joined the Science Stands contingent at the People’s Climate March. The group marshalled outside the Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History. There was a platoon of scientists, wearing white lab coats and carrying placards.
The scientists wheeled along a blackboard, depicting the state of climate science. The board declared, ‘The “Debate” is Over. The Facts are In. The Evidence is Clear. Science Stands for Climate Action.’ The group carried a large banner as well entitled, ‘The Debate is Over.’ There were also a bevy of charts—‘CO2 is rising!’, ‘The Oceans are acidifying!’, ‘Glaciers are melting!’ Citing Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters*, the scientists also carried a banner, ‘Back off Man, I am a Scientist.’
One of the organisers, Lucky Tran, a molecular biologist, commented about the event: ‘If you see something say something, that’s why scientists are here. Because we’re the ones who have seen the warning signs early.’ He was joined by scientists from Columbia University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Natural Resources Defense Council and a range of other institutions.

The President of the Union of Concerned Scientists, Ken Kimmel, observed: ‘We have a huge challenge ahead, but this march and many other things happening all over the world show that there is a strong majority of people who want to take action. This is about proving that democracy still works.’
Climate scientist, James Hansen, said of the People’s Climate March: ‘We must draw the public’s attention to both the dangers of climate disruption and the joy and satisfaction of preserving the remarkable life on our planet.’

The Science Stands group was concerned about the rise of organised climate denial by political parties, industry groups, and think-tanks. The group was concerned that ‘elected leaders and wealthy individuals are waging a damaging, calculated war of the scientific profession’. Science Stands was concerned by the push to ‘cut funding to our research programs’, introduce ‘legislation to erode science education in our schools’, and silence ‘scientists from speaking to the public and media.’ The Science Stands group is keen to name and shame climate deniers and obstructionists.

The scientists were concerned about attacks upon the practitioners of climate science. The climate scientist, Michael Mann, has been particularly concerned about the ‘Serengeti strategy’
being deployed against scientists. He has written about how special interests have sought to intimidate scientists. The Climate Science Legal Defense Fund has been established to enable scientists to conduct research, without the threat of politically motivated attacks.

Science Stands objected to the attacks upon the credibility of science and the false claims that academics have doctored evidence, and scientific institutions are corrupt.

The scientists wanted encourage respect for the work of climate scientists and groups such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The scientists were also keen to promote the use of clean technologies and renewable energy in order to combat climate change. The climate scientists also supported policy initiatives—such as the removal of fossil fuel subsidies, the investment in renewable energy, and the introduction of a price on carbon.
Climate Scientist James Hansen canvassed policy action in the lead-up to the People’s Climate March. He lamented: ‘We have learned that it is not enough to get political leaders to admit the reality of human-caused climate change and promise to address it.’ Hansen insisted: ‘Science actually tells us is that we must reduce emissions in the fastest way possible—atmospheric CO2 is already in the dangerous zone.’ He suggested: ‘The fastest way is a simple rising carbon fee that makes fossil fuel costs honest, our economies more efficient, and provides incentives for the public, businesses, and technology entrepreneurs’. Hansen was of the view: ‘The money that is collected should go to the public where it is needed, where it would spur the economy—not to the government to make the government bigger and more intrusive.’

Reflecting upon the People’s Climate March, Bill McKibben was heartened by the popular demonstration of support of climate action at an international level:

*It strikes me that we should have marched a long time ago. This is a good sign about what happens when people get together and ask for things. And, you know, it’s a good thing to have a mayor like de Blasio who takes that seriously and goes to work on it, and I’m really glad to hear it. The real point of this is that we—if we assemble enough people and enough movement, then we can match the money that the fossil fuel industry has. That’s all they have. They lost the argument 20 years ago about climate change, but they’ve won the fight because they have all the money. We don’t have money, so we better assemble what we do have, which is warm bodies. And there’s a lot of them out here today.*

The People’s Climate March will no doubt place pressure on international leaders to seek to obtain a fair, ambitious, and comprehensive agreement on climate action in Paris in 2015.
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