

Is Skeptic Tom Harris a Dirty Denier of Climate Change?

by John O'Sullivan

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Howls of protests in the mainstream media denouncing a prominent Canadian skeptic of the man-made global warming narrative sparks a heated debate on academic freedom. But what is the truth behind the hype?

Tom Harris, a well-credentialed sessional lecturer, taught students of an undergraduate course in Earth Sciences at Carleton University. Harris defends his course content saying it fairly represents uncertainties about the global warming narrative being spoon fed to the public and in our schools and universities.

Below is the entire transcript of the Harris interview provided to The Guardian. Judge for yourselves whether Harris is a 'Dirty Denier.'

February 28, 2012

Interview between The Guardian's US Environmental reporter [Suzanne Goldenberg](#) and [International Climate Science Coalition's Tom Harris](#)

(Recorded with the stated agreement of both parties)

Transcription follows:

(Dialing)

Suzanne Goldenberg (S): Hello. Guardian.

Tom Harris (T): Yeah, hi. Is this Suzanne Goldenberg?

S: Yes, speaking.

T: Yeah, this is Tom Harris from Ottawa.

S: Hi, thanks for calling. I was wondering – you know – what you've made of – if you've seen this report and what you've made of it.

T: Yeah, first of all, do you mind if I record our call? You know, it's an important thing for me have, to have as a record.

S: No, you can record it.

T: Yeah sure. Yeah the report is – it is interesting that biologists feel qualified to critique a course in Earth Sciences. That was the first reaction I had is, this was assembled by an Earth Sciences professor before me, who's a full professor at Carleton and (Harris interrupted by Goldenberg) ...

S: And who is that. So you're saying the lecture material isn't identical to that?

T: No, my lecture material I think it – I taught it 3 years, 4 times, one year I taught it twice. I taught the course in 2009, 10 and 11 and I took over (interrupted) ...

S: So that means – I guess it's a half a year course.

T: Yeah that's right - given January to April actually. What happened (interrupted) ...

S: So you taught it four times over that three years.

T: Yes, that's right. Twice in 2010 I taught a summer course as well. And I was given the notes. It was actually written by Professor Patterson - Tim Patterson who is at Carleton and he's a full professor, in fact he's acting chairman right now – he's a very senior professor and he went on sabbatical and I'd been working with him for a decade on climate science and since the course is a general interest course it doesn't require a specialized knowledge – it covers everything from soup to nuts literally – it required somebody who was a good communicator and someone who had a good science background and somebody who could teach the basics of the course. And of course when I get questions which occasionally you do - you know most of the students are not in science so usually the questions are very easy - but when I got questions that were more difficult I would actually consult with people like Tim Patterson. But he was on sabbatical so I was brought in to teach it and the first year didn't go too badly – I used 95% of my course material was his stuff - I added in my own stuff to update it a bit. But by the third year I guess I was 75% still using his material so it is rather strange that you have these young biologists – they're very young – I think they are just in their 20's - critiquing a senior professor in Earth Sciences. If it was Earth Sciences professors, you know experienced ones, critiquing it (interrupted) ...

S: Okay, can I ask you. I get your point. You're saying that it's primarily his material - that they aren't qualified.

T: That's right.

S: But so I guess I want to get to the gist of it is that - they are saying that what you are doing is is deviating in you know from established science which which sort of scientific consensus is that climate change is real and that it is largely caused by man.

T: Yah, that is what they are saying.

S: Is that a statement that you would agree with?

T: Well there's a couple of statements there, I mean--I'm deviating from science literature - well, no I'm not. The scientific literature is - there's all kind of literature across the board - if you look at the tens of thousands of scientific papers that are put out every year, there are good scientists who say we are causing virtually no climate change, that it is almost entirely natural and those are serious scientific papers that come out from UCLA and many of the top schools in the world and they have to (interrupted) ...

S: So then then you reject the idea that there is a scientific consensus.

T: Oh yeah, there is no consensus. I mean, that is a myth. It's been - you know people say there's a consensus but whenever I've challenged people - show me that there's actually been a poll of people who focus on the causes of climate change and that the majority of them think that human caused climate change is dangerous problem - nobody presents a poll. Either they are asking the wrong questions or they are asking only a tiny subset of the tens of thousands of climate scientists that are in the world. As far as I know, and I've never seen a reputable poll that proves the idea of consensus and so no I don't think there is known to be a consensus on one side or the other.

S: And your personal view?

T: My personal view is that it's like a bell curve and you know I've worked in the area for about 15 years and I think what you have are almost no scientists on either extreme where they say we're definitely causing catastrophe and it's going to happen unless we stop it versus those who say we are definitely not causing any change. I don't think there's very many on either of those two extremes. I think that most of the scientists are in the middle where they are pretty humble and they say, 'well this is an awfully complex and very

immature field so, yeah, we should cut down on pollution and save energy and do those things, but the idea that we control the climate – naa – who knows’. In fact, you know it’s interesting – one of the main comments (interrupted) ...

S: Tom can I ask you personally – I mean for someone who has been steeped in the material for 15 years what is your view on the causes of climate change?

T: Well, I don’t know. (interrupted) ...

S: Because of human agency?

T: I don’t know and I don’t think that even the world’s leaders know but the sun does show a lot better correlation with temperature over medium, short and long term time frames than carbon dioxide. I mean there are times in the past like 440 million years ago when carbon dioxide was 15 times you know 1,500% of today’s level and we were at the coldest period in the last half billion years. There are other times when we were in warm periods when it was high CO₂ but you know when it comes to the sun – if you actually look at the sun’s changes there’s a very good correlation, far, far better than CO₂’s so I would say the most likely candidate for the primary driver and of course there’s a dozen drivers of climate, everything from ocean circulation to you know continental drift to volcanoes, there’s so many things - even our position in the galaxy affects climate but I’d say in the short term probably it’s the sun. That’s my belief but then again there may be something we haven’t discovered yet. I mean, it was only 2003 when they started the field of cosmoclimatology where they found the correlation between the sun and climate and they also found a cause which was the influx of cosmic rays which were causing clouds and when the sun became brighter it pushed away a lot of the cosmic rays so you had less clouds and so the earth became even hotter. And that was only discovered in 2003 and so this is a very, very new science. So even the scientists who are expert in the field will not say definitively yes it is caused by the sun but they do say that it’s starting to look like it.

S: So can I ask you also the other claim is made there is that you have an association or that your organization gets funding from Heartland Institute.

T: Well our funding sources are confidential to protect people's privacy and to protect actually their safety because in some cases there have been a lot of threats – there's even been death threats against some of the scientists that I work with. And (interrupted) ...

S: In Canada there have been death threats?

T: Uh huh, yeah exactly. Tim Ball for example – he's had five death threats and he has no qualms of saying that. He's actually said that on the media. So it's not safe anymore really to say – you know, unless you're doing it as a profession and you have to do it for your money you know - I mean I do it as an income (interrupted) ...

S: So even but you were identified in the document that Heartland had authenticated as having received money.

T: Well I don't know if Heartland's authenticated it.

S: Yeah they have. authenticated it.

T: Well, I mean we have a - I'll tell you we have no funding from any industry, from no foundations, and from no government and that's quite a contrast to say David Suzuki who has funding from (being interrupted but continuing to partially complete sentence) the major corporations in Canada.

S: So you do receive some funding from Heartland?

T: Well, you know I've told you the answer to that and that is that we don't reveal our funders and we say that very clearly in all our documents.

S: Well, okay so you say you don't reveal your funders but you but you know how am I supposed to take (not clear after this as interrupted by Harris) ...

T: Why, why do you ask?

S: ...if you don't have funding from industry if you're not revealing your funders because I mean I could be Shell and give money to "X" who would then give money to you.

T: Well why do you ask?

S: Well because it's, I mean it's germane to why you would you know it's a question being raised that you've been getting funds from an organization whose core mission is – among their core missions is to sort of go against the established teaching of science and I am wondering if this is something you sign on to as well?

T: Well then I guess you're asking if our opinion can be bought, and if you're asking if our opinion can be bought that's kind of insulting but at the same time it also suggests that you can't believe what I say because perhaps we're dishonest and if we're dishonest then why would you believe the answer to my, your question. I mean I could say we were funded by grey nuns out of Nova Scotia but if I'm dishonest then why would you even believe me.

S: So would you say I'm asking well would you say that the funding from Heartland has no effect whatsoever on on your activity or your views?

T: Well, the funding from no source has any influence. In fact we've been offered by industry to actually sign statements of work to actually give certain messages and we've sent it back to them and said no. You cannot tell a tenured professor what to say or they will quit your group. It doesn't matter who the funders are. You see, we have a basic message and the message is something that these scientists have been giving for decades. In the case of Fred Singer, he's not with our group but he's a good example, he was giving this message long before it was a politically sensitive topic and long before anybody funded him and his message hasn't changed. What it has done – the additional funding that Fred has gotten from industry – I understand and I don't know personally, but if he has – it's given him the opportunity to have a bigger platform but it hasn't changed his message. And that's the same thing with us. If tomorrow, for example, we were funded by Exxon - and quite frankly if we were funded by industry I would have no qualms with that – we don't have any funding from industry but if we did that would be fine. But they would understand, as the ones have who've tried to get us to sign statements of work to actually, you know, give a message, they would have to understand that the message goes just as it goes. You know it makes no difference who funds us. These tenured professors have been giving the

same message for many years and if I went in and told them, look we have a funder from the oil industry so you can't criticize the oil sands, they'd tell me to get lost and they'd quit the group. And that's (interrupted) ...

S: Do you think that I guess (interrupted) ...

T: It's a red herring.

S: Yeah okay. Do you think that we need a complete overhaul of the way climate change is taught in school?

T: Yes, very much so. What we should be doing is getting rid of the political bias. We should get rid of the notion that there is a consensus and we should look at it as science and we should teach the whole field - not just the tiny little bit that says greenhouse gases are responsible. I mean, I have two daughters in high school, actually one's in first year university, and I've been following their text books and they make a lot of statements that are simply not true. Scientists agree, you know, carbon dioxide is driving climate change. Well that's baloney. Scientists don't agree on very much in this field. It's a very new field and certainly they don't agree that carbon dioxide is driving climate. I mean they're - I think what they need to do is actually take a step back and say look - this whole dogma of, you know, human caused climate change has become so sacrosanct that nobody's questioning it and yet science is all about questioning. We should be encouraging the students to look at this - is this really true? You know, what other references can you find to show that carbon dioxide may only be a minor contributor? But they don't do that and in fact it's interesting when I went into parent-teacher night I brought it up with the biology teacher in front of - you know like they all the teachers sorry they had the teacher at the front and all the parents in the chairs - and I said, "Are you showing them the range of opinions on the causes of climate change?" and the biology teacher said, "Oh well, we can't risk leaving the Earth as a barren wasteland to our children!" and she just became sort of hysterical and fortunately she didn't know that I was the father of my daughter so she wasn't penalized in class which is good because she didn't know who I was but I thought - oh, oh man, I can't talk to her. Because they've been told basically what's true and they have to teach

what's truth and that's it. And the fact that there's no truth in science first of all but secondly the fact that there is a lot of good scientists out there – left wing, right wing, pro-capitalist, anti-capitalist, makes no difference – most of them are actually non-partisan. The fact that there are many scientists out there who disagree just doesn't get into the curriculum at all and I think quite frankly that if Heartland encourages a more open discussion about climate in the classroom - without saying that they're point of view is right and the others are wrong but just encouraging a more open point of view – I think that's very helpful.

S: Okay. Great. Well I won't keep you any longer. I just wanted – so what response have you made officially to this report if any?

T: Well, none actually.

S: Was today the first day you first heard about it or did you know it was in the works?

T: I heard it was in the works but I hadn't actually seen it till just a little while ago. My first reaction to the report is this – it's rather funny actually, it's hilarious I think because first of all the people ... doing the work are not qualified to comment. Secondly, the first half (interrupted) ...

S: But some of the things they said you know anybody could comment on like numbers of weather stations or something that you got wrong.

T: Oh yeah, well I haven't even seen those details yet. But the main thing I noticed is that the first part of the report is completely riddled with logical fallacies – guilt by association, ad hominem, motive intent, straw man arguments, red herring. I mean, you just look it up on Wikipedia and you've got all the logical fallacies and they are using almost all of them. I mean the fact is all that matters in the course is what was taught, not whether I have some nefarious motive. All that matters is what was taught and if the items in there are actually wrong then fine that's good input to the next person who teaches the course but all the beginning of the report – and some of its just 100% wrong like saying I was a lobbyist or am a lobbyist. I've never been a lobbyist. In Canada, to be a lobbyist you have to be registered in the Lobby

Registration Act or it's illegal and I never have been and anyone can check that. And it's interesting because groups like the Suzuki Foundation have a dozen lobbyists who meet with some of the top politicians in the country. We don't do that and the reason we don't do that is because we don't think it's useful or effective. We think that what's needed is public education so that people can learn enough about the basics of the field that they can make up their own mind. And they may agree or they may disagree with us and that's their choice. But lobbying is a waste of time as far as I'm concerned. I don't think politicians give a hoot what's real. I think they do what's popular and what the public want. And so as a consequence we focus on public education. So you know when I got down to that part and it said Harris is a lobbyist and of course on DeSmogBlog today it's hilarious – they started out with “an energy industry public relations man”. (Laughter) This is funny. I have no energy clients – anyway, in fact I don't have clients because it's not that kind of group – “and a lobbyist with no background in climate science” – well actually I do. My Masters is in thermal fluids and of course the atmosphere is a big thermal fluid system so I have (interrupted) ...

S: They also say that you go to the Heartland conferences regularly.

T: Yeah sure. So does Roger (interrupted) ...

S: How often, how often do you go?

T: Well whenever they'll pay my expenses I go anytime that I can. Roger Harrabin from the BBC was there as well and certainly he doesn't support them. You know Sonia Crisenberensen [should be Sonja Boehmer-Christiansen] who is one of our advisors from the University of Hull – she's a devout socialist and she's she's there too. I mean I think it's helpful (interrupted) ...

S: So like you go, I've only been to one of them. So do you go every year?

T: If I can, I haven't gone to every one but I (interrupted) ...

S: How many do you say you've gone to?

T: Well, I went to two in New York, one in Washington and one in Chicago. So four I guess.

S: How long have you been working with Heartland?

T: I don't actually work with Heartland.

S: Well you know having connections with them, going to their conferences, receiving funds from them.

T: Well, you are speculating on the funding part.

S: Not really, it's in documents that have been authenticated.

T: Well, if you're still going to commit that logical fallacy I don't have any comment because you're a smart person and I've just explained to you why the funding sources don't matter. If you can find out (interrupted) ...

S: Sure, but how long, I'm asking (interrupted) ...

T: Don't interrupt, please.

S: ... how long you've been associated with them.

T: No, no don't interrupt. I'm not interrupting you. The question is has any of our scientists changed their points of view as a result of funding, as a result of anything, as a result of being involved with us. If they've said this sort of thing and they've had this point of view based on their science research for many years even before this was a controversial issue then I think it's a complete red herring to look at funding sources and I explained that with respect to Fred Singer. I mean that's just a logical fallacy – and that's not even a function of the topic – it's - it's just a - it doesn't make any sense. And, you know, similarly thinking that our opinions are bought is, you know, rather insulting. I think it's much more sensible to look at our opinions and see if you agree with them or not.

S: Okay so you don't want to say how long – when your first contact with Heartland was?

T: I don't really know. I think perhaps in the 80's they might have sent me a newsletter or something and over time I gradually came to know who they were. It's only in the last few years that I've had regular updates from them but I mean I'd heard of them – I didn't even know they stood in the global warming issue at all until I was invited to one of their conferences.

S: So which one was the first. Was that the one (interrupted) ...

T: The first one was the first one. It was the one in New York in 2008.

S: OK

T: Yeah. I think their conferences are very good you know and one of things they do that the other side doesn't do (interrupted) ...

S: I think they are actually not going to hold them any more.

T: Yeah, maybe not.

S: I mean if you've looked in those documents (interrupted)

T: Yeah, what I was trying to say before you interrupted me is, I was trying to say that what they do that the other groups don't do is they invite in people on the other side. And they actually held a debate last time in Washington between a person on one side and a person on the Heartland side. And it was a very polite debate. It was very well received and I think it was very constructive. I think that if both sides in the debate were to do this sort of thing at the conference, a lot of the poisonous atmosphere that exists now would go away. So I think Heartland are to be complimented for being that open and friendly with the other side.

S: Okay, and have you – do you have any plans to teach that course in 2012 academic year?

T: No actually.

S: You taught it this past fall? Or 2011 means in the spring or summer?

T: No, I taught it in the winter, January to April 2011.

S: Uh huh.

T: They're not offering it this year. They don't offer the courses every year. They offered it four times in a row and they are taking a year off so it's not being offered in 2012. But coming up in 2013 it's going to be offered again by Professor Patterson because he's back from sabbatical and I guess his workload is perhaps less but whatever the reason is he's the originator and owner of the course. He's the expert so he's teaching it coming up. I might get a chance to teach it in the future. I think that the purpose of the report

that just came out was to frighten Carleton so they never brought me back to teach again. And I don't think Carleton really will pay much attention to the report because the report is so obviously amateurish and even in a philosophical sense it doesn't make any sense with all the first few pages being logical fallacies. I think Carleton just ignore it, quite frankly, and if I were in their shoes I would too. I would ignore it because they have a full tenured expert professor who's going to be teaching it this coming year again and anybody who does teach it teaches it based on his material and that's a hell of a lot more credible than a bunch of young biologists who think that using the word denial is a sexy way to put in their headline – I mean that's just a nasty headline. I mean, Professor Patterson's wife's parents (interrupted) ...

S: I didn't see the headline. Is that the headline on the report (interrupted) ...

T: Yeah, I'll just open it up from your e-mail here.

S: I, you know. I didn't remember.

T: Yeah, the headline is actually a giveaway that we are dealing with something other than an honest science critique. "Climate Change Denial in the Classroom". Now of course the term denial – and Professor Patterson told this right to the author because they met last week – that is offensive because Professor Patterson's wife's parents are Jewish. And of course what they're trying to do here, as the word 'denial' is frequently used, is to have a subconscious connotation with Holocaust denial which of course is offensive and really horrific. And that's just, you know, a typical logical fallacy – it's worse than a logical fallacy – it's extremely offensive. And there's no denial at all. In fact, the course specifically is about natural and human change throughout the eons. In fact, we have a whole lecture – three hours worth – talking about how climate change has affected human society throughout the ages. So the idea that we are denying it is insane. I mean it's the exact opposite. In fact, here's a quote for you, Tim Patterson says that he's a "denial denier" because of course he never denies climate change. It's just a trick. And when you see that in the headlines (interrupted) ...

S: But he, but he denies that it's man made?

T: No, of course not. No scientist would do that. No sensible scientist. He says that, based on his research, the solar affect seems to be much better correlated with climate than anything humans are doing. And, but he doesn't come up with any definitive statements about what is or is not reality because he's researching it and it's a very new and very immature field.

S: Uh-huh

T: But certainly his research shows that the sun is probably the main driver of climate and that the human effect is very small. But of course at the same time humans cause pollution, humans use too much energy and so a lot of the approach, and of course, climate hurts people. In fact, this is one area where we disagree – sorry we do agree with the U.N., Al Gore and people like that. And that is that climate hurts people significantly and throughout the eons you can see periods where civilizations were completely destroyed by global cooling in particular and drought and things like that. So we have to prepare for climate change. You know one of the big problems in the world right now is that 97 (interrupted) ...

S: Wait, wait sorry, so we do have to prepare for climate change?

T: Oh yeah, right, adaptation, coping mechanisms, you know, infrastructure strength. Right now in Ottawa we have most of our power lines above ground and so if we have a big wind storm we lose power. But that's crazy – we can bury them underground and then we don't have that problem. In the Sahel they have massive climate change which is affecting all sorts of people. In Northern Canada, the permafrost is melting. There's a lot of very damaging effects of climate change and that's where the focus should be—is helping real people. But you know one of the big problems is that 95% of the climate finance in the world right now – there's \$97 billion a year being spent on climate finance - 95% of that is going to stopping climate change and only 5% is to help real people in the world today. And that's, that's really immoral because basically what you are saying then is that (interrupted) ...

S: Where did you get the figure \$97 billion?

T: I can find it for you.

S: Yeah, could you send me that?

T: Yeah, sure.

S: You've got my e-mail.

T: Sure. And another thing you might be interested in is when I was in Copenhagen at the conference, the climate conference, the Africans, in particular the Ethiopians, were very, very angry about this. They looked outside the conference and they said, "Look at all these people protesting. They're protesting about what might happen in 50 years, whereas we need the money and the help now." You know and they were really angry about this and justifiably so because what they were saying is that this is effectively a negative discount rate. You know, discount rates talk about how much is a dollar worth in a year versus today. They are saying that the value of a person's life in 50 years is more value than a person living today. And that's what the U.N. and others are saying when they put almost all their effort on what might happen in 50 years versus what is happening right now. I mean, left or right, you know it makes no difference – that's immoral. I mean the fact is people now need help and like you know in the Sahel in Africa in the East Africa drought they did not get anywhere near the money they needed and yet, at the same time, Canada and other countries were donating far more money to fulfilling the Copenhagen Accord because of what might happen in 70 years. You know there's something wrong with that. And that's where even left wingers and socialists and people who ordinarily wouldn't agree with us completely agree with us. The previous head of the – and I'll send this to you if you'd like – the previous head of the British Advance – Society for the Advancement of Science – they said that this is something wrong – this makes no sense. And yeah, we may be causing catastrophic climate change and we should work on that but there are real people now that are suffering and dying because of climate change that we're not helping. And that is immoral. And that's one of the things that ICSC stands for, is we stand for a reallocation of funds to the current problems.

S: Well I'm going to have to leave it there but thank you so much for calling me back. I do appreciate it. If you have that document you mentioned about (interrupted) the 97 billion?

T: Yeah, 97 billion.

S: Yeah.

T: Yeah, sure.

S: Yeah, I'd love to see that.

T: Yeah, I'll find it.

S: Okay thank you.

T: Okay.

S: Thanks. Bye.

(End of call)