

## **What would Thatcher do today about global warming?**

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### **She'd trust the science . . . but today's green zealots would have been handbagged**

Margaret Thatcher was proud of her scientific training. It was one of the reasons she was suspicious of grand economic or sociological theories: she did not see them as truly scientific.

She was not averse to outflanking someone who knew little science with some deftly deployed chemistry. I saw her do it to Helmut Kohl, whose advisers I had stoked up to press her on acid rain, when I was as a minister trying to change British policy and get expensive flue gas desulphurisation equipment added to our coal-fired power stations.

She obviously saw me coming a long way in advance. We arrived in Bonn on hot midsummer day of smog. "Now Helmut," she said to the cowering Chancellor, "I will tell you what you have here. You have got an inversion and a smog. If you had proper clean air laws here like we have you wouldn't have this trouble. Let me explain the chemistry . . ." We heard no more about acid rain on that visit.

She was unmoved, as always, by clamour from pressure groups — on that issue as on any other. But on another, arguably more crucial, environmental issue, the damage to the ozone layer done by CFCs, where there were powerful industrial lobbies opposed to action, she moved quickly, putting Britain in the lead among the countries who generated effective, legally backed international action. She studied the science closely, and understood it. Perhaps it helped that key work on measuring the damage to the ozone layer had been done by the British Antarctic Survey.

So what would she think about climate change? I do not mean what did she say, if anything, in her long retirement; but what would she have said if she was in power, advised by the advisers she would have been advised by? Would her response have been like that for acid rain or for CFCs?

She would certainly have started sceptical. That is just to say she would have thought like a scientist: scientists are by nature sceptical. She would have been influenced not at all by quasi-religious clamour or by UN declarations. She would have tested the subject for herself. Much would have depended on whom she trusted.

One of my problems over acid rain was that she liked and trusted Sir Walter Marshall, a very good scientist who was head of the old nationalised Central Electricity Generating Board, and who had helped her to break the early power strikes. His anxiety not to worsen the situation for coal even more by adding extra costs in the coal-fired power stations influenced her; but so did his view that forest

damage in Scandinavia had far more complex causes than acid rain brought on the west wind from Britain.

On CFCs, she accepted the science put in front of her, far more overwhelming as it was. So on climate change it would depend on who she trusted. Would it have been the sceptics Christopher Booker and Nigel Lawson or the scientists Robert May and Martin Rees? Who knows? There can be no proof. But I personally think that that honorary FRS after her name would have won the day. I think she would have been fascinated by the complexity of the subject and accepted the majority position — the majority position of scientists, that is.

What action would she have wanted? She would surely have fought hard against the imposition of immense economic burdens, which (perhaps to the surprise of today's young anti-Thatcher protesters in the streets) she would have feared would fall hardest on the poorest. She would have driven nuclear power forward and gone for fracking. She would have listened to the argument that better spending later would be more use than bad spending now, and I am sure that the environmentalist James Lovelock would have been in and out of Downing Street explaining that adaptation was much more sensible than panic, and that wind turbines were another subsidised racket, the successor to the old Common Agricultural Policy.

None of the religious believers on either side of the dispute would have found her an easy bedfellow. But she might just have been right.

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