

Perpetual Parodies

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An Italian court sentenced six scientists to six years in prison on Oct. 23 for failing to predict a devastating earthquake that struck the city of L'Aquila in April 2009. But considering that nobody can predict an earthquake with absolute certainty, the sentence seems a bit crazy. I am not convinced that the ruling was justified, but it should serve as a warning to politicized pseudoscientists, those so-called experts who typically advise government bureaucrats around the world.

What happened in L'Aquila? There had been numerous foreshocks beginning in 2008. Such vibrations sometimes precede major earthquakes but at other times merely release tension in the Earth's crust. Not all foreshocks lead to major earthquakes, and not all major earthquakes are preceded by foreshocks.

Authorities gathered at a scientific conference on March 31, 2009 to discuss whether an earthquake in L'Aquila was imminent. Predictably, the scientists limited their statements to suggestions that a quake was unlikely but that the possibility could not be ruled out.

At the news conference that followed, a bureaucrat named Bernardo De Bernardinis, who is not a scientist, blurted out advice for local citizens to stay at home and drink wine, and he

even went so far as to suggest which type of wine to drink: Montepulciano. His rationale was that science had proved that there was no danger.

Exactly six days later, a 6.3-magnitude earthquake leveled much of L'Aquila and killed more than 300 people.

The problem is that the six scientists who stood beside De Bernardinis at the news conference remained silent when he confidently claimed that science had proved something that it had not. Unfortunately, this is typical behavior for the quasi-scientific specialists who serve the interests of a ruling bureaucracy.

The discourse on global warming is structured the same way. Scientists who believe in global warming point to what they claim is an increase in natural disasters. The only problem with that statement is that there is no statistical way to prove it. In fact, the fourth assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report released in 2007 says there is no clear trend. At the same time, however, the summary of the report claims that climate change is "likely" in the future, and you can bet that the summary is all that politicians will read.

But the Skolkovo technology park conducted an unintentional experiment recently by revealing just how far some scientists will go in their willingness to kowtow to government bureaucrats. Most of the scientists involved in this demonstration were specialists in green energy, renewable energy and other similar "fluffologies." One ace, Rodney Allam, even shared the Nobel prize with Al Gore despite holding nothing more than a bachelor's degree in chemistry.

Last week, Skolkovo and the Global Energy Foundation brought together these scientists for a conference on perpetual motion. It was called an "An Energy Dialogue on Perpetual Motion: From Science Fiction to the Innovation of the Century."

There were 27 speakers from 10 countries in attendance, and each of the speakers was a recipient of President Vladimir Putin's Global Energy Prize worth \$1 million to recipients. Perhaps they thought it was some kind of joke or that perpetual motion actually meant some form of renewable energy.

In any case, for serious scientists to attend a conference on perpetual motion is like a group of historians attending a conference on the Holocaust sponsored by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And yet they came.

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