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## Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater

**K**arlsson and colleagues ([DN-Debatt 12/2/13](#)) raise some worthwhile and certainly provocative points when they critique the political agendas of scientists who campaign for surpassing democratic processes on the authority of science. Unfortunately, these worthwhile points risk being overshadowed when the authors go too far in their critique.

That scientists and other experts engage in politics and campaigning is in general not problematic – they are after all citizens. Further, the fact that campaigners align with related interests, some of who provide funding and other support, is also not unusual or unexpected. Democracies function through the building of coalitions and campaigning for action. Such actions do not happen for free. The fact that the Rockefeller Foundation endowment, cited by Karlsson and colleagues in ominous terms, comes from the family's oil money made in the first half of the last century is an interesting bit of trivia, but hardly relevant to the causes that it supports today.

Where campaigners get into trouble, on all sides of an issue, is when they fail to disclose conflicts of interest, or cherry-pick or otherwise abuse evidence to support a cause. Karlsson and colleagues

are exactly right that efforts to link the recent typhoon in the Philippines to climate change is not supported by evidence (or the authoritative IPCC), but they fail to make any link to such false claims to financial or other conflicts of interest. Of course, misrepresenting evidence in policy is bad enough, there is no need to speculate on financial incentives absent evidence of a conflict of interest.

As we have written recently on these pages ([DN-Debatt 9/29/13](#) and [10/8/13](#)), campaigning scientists get into trouble when they seek to circumvent democratic processes by invoking the authority of science. Some scientists have even gone so far as to express a desire to usurp democratic institutions with more authoritarian forms of governance. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung recently published [a piece](#) criticizing leading German scientists for adopting exactly this sort of strategy (1). Such approaches to politics place a risk not only on effective policy making, which depends upon plurality in policy design and implementation, but perhaps more importantly the legitimacy of expertise in politics.

If the public comes to see experts as simply another powerful group in society seeking to wield influence, then placed at risk is the important contribution that experts can make to the practice of democracy, which includes helping decision makers and the public identify and assess alternative possible courses of action. By cast suspicion on their adversaries without basic evidence, Karlsson and colleagues go too far in their critique, and thus take much the same risks as the climate scientist they criticize.

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