

Climate change deniers find their audience shrinking much faster

The United Nations General Assembly is one of the few places where doubters still have a platform

DAMIEN MCELROY .

The convening power of the United Nations around its annual general assembly, otherwise known as UNGA, is one of the great strengths of the global organisation.

The UN secretary general's yearly theme has the power to concentrate minds and affords a bully pulpit for a particular agenda.

This week has seen the world's attention turn to climate change. A summit opening at the UN headquarters in New York on Monday will focus on the climate crisis and follows protests by an estimated four million people, who pounded the streets of their cities on Friday in the name of a global climate strike. For a short window, climate change will enjoy priority over peace-building, conflict or migration.

That is not to say that none of these issues are not linked or won't be discussed. The nature of the climate crisis is that no factors stand in isolation.

It is appropriate that Antonio Guterres should have used this year's meeting to give primary focus to the environmental challenges faced by mankind. As the week progresses, world leaders will gather to give speeches from the marbled podium in front of the assembly.

The messages of the climate summit will be repeated and reinforced alongside perennial national priorities.

Sir David King, a former chief scientific adviser to the British government, raised eyebrows earlier



In a protest that started a movement, Greta skips school to sit outside of the Swedish parliament in Stockholm in order to raise awareness of climate change.

this month when he said he had been frightened by recent weather events. In particular, this summer's heatwave in Europe, the rate of loss of ice in Antarctica and the exceptionally slow progress of devastating Hurricane Dorian caused concern. These extreme events are occurring far earlier than the scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change had ever

predicted. As such, the probability of people being affected by the consequences of climate change has grown much more likely.

"If you got on a plane with a one-in-100 chance of crashing, you would be appropriately scared," observed Sir David as he explained why we should all be alarmed by what is happening.

The intellectual argument over

climate change has been hotly contested than the As the UN summit opens, noting there are inter-demonstrations of an unmet challenge.

What was once a futuristic sceptical commentary has come the domain of a few

The doubters once popular but ropery argu-

Dishonesty and denialism is a virus

GAVIN ESLER

Over the past few weeks, I have been travelling around the UK speaking to diverse groups about the future of Europe and the prospect of Brexit. Most of these public meetings are fun. Some are truly inspiring but a few are a puzzle. Conway Hall is a famous London landmark, historically a venue of civilised debate on ethical issues. I spoke there on the topic of "the normalisation of lies in public life". We all tell lies occasionally and we know it is wrong, yet sometimes we do it so as not to cause offence.

"Yes," we say, "I loved that shirt you gave me for my birthday." Or: "Yes, your new hairstyle suits you."

We are also often not truthful when purchasing something online when forced to tick a box showing we have read the terms and conditions. Have you ever read the terms and conditions? Me neither. I cannot ever remember reading thousands of words of T&C legalese.

At the Conway Hall meeting, when talking about lying in public life, I was asked a question by a woman who said she had voted for Brexit in the referendum of 2016. When someone says: "I voted for Brexit", I always ask which version of Brexit they voted for, since more than three years later, we still cannot agree what Brexit means.

"I voted for a 'clean Brexit'," the woman said confidently, explaining that meant "leaving the European Union with no deal on October 31".

Unfortunately nearly every part of that sentence is impossible.

The words "clean Brexit" only became fashionable after a book of that title was published in August last year - not when we voted two years earlier. Moreover, the words "clean Brexit" have no real meaning, rather like previous Brexit slogans of having deals called "Canada-plus", "Norway-plus" or "managed no deal". Once you add in the word "plus" or "managed" to any "deal", it can mean anything you want it to mean.

But the woman could not have voted as she now thinks she did for other reasons too. No deal was never an option on the 2016 Brexit referendum ballot paper. Prominent politicians wanting Brexit - Nigel Farage, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson - explicitly stated that Britain would leave the European Union with a deal and, so they claimed at the time, a very good deal because, as they put it, "we hold all the cards". Finally - and most obviously - in June 2016, no date was fixed for leaving the EU, so the woman could not possibly have voted to leave on October 31, 2019. That date was only fixed in March this year, and even now it might not happen.



Billboard by the anti-Brexit group called Led By Donkeys, showing a quote from British Prime Minister Boris Johnson promising a deal.

The puzzle is how a decent, articulate human being like this voter could so profoundly delude herself about easily verifiable facts. Perhaps it is a tiny example of a phenomenon known more grandly as "historical negationism". It means humans give accounts of the past by selectively (and sometimes deliberately) ignoring or denying troublesome facts which undermine their case.

Napoleon Bonaparte once

wryly observed that history "is a set of lies agreed upon". On the day I had the discussion in Conway Hall, British newspapers began running extracts of the autobiography of the prime minister who got us into the Brexit mess in the first place, David Cameron. His "factual" account of our recent history did not please either side in the Brexit debate.

The Brexit supporting tabloid newspaper The Sun called

it "Mills and Boon for Remainers," referring to a particularly soppy kind of fantasy love story. A newspaper in the Remain camp, the Guardian, excoriated Mr Cameron for a self-serving account pretending that the referendum mess for which he was responsible was really a "boon" for Britain if the Leavers' dastardly tactics hadn't stopped him from getting his message across to the great British public.

Mr Cameron's account of the referendum was largely a self-serving account of the referendum mess for which he was responsible. The Remain camp largely led a woeful vote and the te

Historians have long struggled to separate fact from fiction – but the truth is even harder to distinguish when politicians actively try to rewrite events as they unfold