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U.K. judge rules Gore film 'exaggerated'

Parent challenged the showing of documentary in classrooms

Presented by



Allison Hanes, National Post, With Files From News Services

A British High Court judge this week exposed nine inaccuracies in former U.S. vicepresident Al Gore's award-winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, labelling it "a political film" and calling many of its claims about climate change "alarmist" and "exaggerated."

Justice Michael Burton had been asked to rule on whether the showing of the Oscar-winning film in British classrooms amounted to education or indoctrination.

The ruling, just two days before Mr. Gore was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize yesterday for his environmental activism, did not undermine the overall premise of the work and stopped short of preventing screenings. But it has dramatically altered the uncritical way in which it was being presented to British high school students as debate simmers in Canada and elsewhere over whether what some consider propaganda is being passed off as incontrovertible fact.

The British judgment resulted from a court challenge brought by Stuart Dimmock, the truck driver parent of two teenage sons, who argued that the British government's decision to distribute *An Inconvenient Truth* to all public high schools violated a provision of the education act forbidding "the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in the school."

After viewing it himself, Judge Burton lauded Mr. Gore's film as "powerful, dramatically presented and highly professionally produced."

But he found the film blurs the line between science, politics and environmental advocacy.

"It is built round the charismatic presence of the ex-vicepresident, Al Gore, whose crusade it now is to persuade the world of the dangers of climate change cause by global warming," Judge Burton wrote. "Is is now common ground that this is not simply a science film -- although it is clear that it is based substantially on scientific research and opinion -- but that it is a political film.

"Its theme is ... that urgent, and if necessary, expensive and inconvenient steps must be taken to counter it."

Kalee Kreider, a spokesperson for Mr. Gore, said: "Of the thousands of facts, the judge seemingly only took issue with a handful."

Since the documentary began winning awards, it has become a popular educational tool worldwide.

In Canada, charitable foundations have funded the purchase and distribution of thousands of copies for schools.

But some have questioned whether its contents have been served up not as fodder for discussion and debate, but as scientific fact.

In Surrey, B.C., the school board passed a motion requiring that a documentary espousing a contrary viewpoint -- such as the British film *The Great Global Warming Swindle* -- be screened for students alongside Mr. Gore's.

Heather Stilwell said proposing the motion earned her the scorn of detractors.

"As soon as you dared to question, then it was in to attack mode. I was called a [George W.] Bush-lover -- I just asked if it was good science," she said. "Who can vote against being balanced in the classroom?"

She applauded the British court decision as common sense.

Victoria Serda, Ontario's deputy Green party leader, has been trained to deliver the slide show presentation on climate change that Mr. Gore gives in the documentary and has done so 67 times in Ontario, before 17,000 people, including school children.

She dismissed the court decision as "minor."

"How can a judge in England make a determination on whether something is scientific fact when he has no background in it?" Ms. Serda said. "This is a judge that doesn't even know what he's talking about, he doesn't work in the field, he's not a climate scientist, he's not a peer-reviewed scientific journalist. He has no basis in order to even go forward with this decision he's making. It's just kind of silly."

The court case brought by Mr. Dimmock resulted in the production of guidelines for teachers on how to bring a more critical viewpoint to classroom discussions of the film.

A first draft by the Education Ministry was produced during the court case, but Judge Burton found it didn't go far enough in addressing nine factual inaccuracies he uncovered in the film by comparing Mr. Gore's claims with a report by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

New guidelines were produced that draw "specific attention to where Mr. Gore may be in error and/or in any event where he deviates from the consensus view as set out in the IPCC report, and by, where appropriate, raising specific questions for discussions."

Hundreds of copies of *An Inconvenient Truth* have been donated to Ontario schools by the Tides Canada Foundation.

Ontario Education Minister Kathleen Wynne said last summer it is not required viewing and that the government is not endorsing Mr. Gore's position.

Frank Bruseker, president of the Alberta Teachers Association, said he hasn't heard of the film being widely disseminated in his province.

As a former science teacher who has seen the film, Mr. Bruseker said if he showed it in his classroom, he would provide a disclaimer.

"You have to present the whole picture. Part of our job in educating students in my opinion is not to indoctrinate them with our views, but to educate them so they can make their own decisions."

NINE CONVENIENT UNTRUTHS

Untruth 1

Gore says: A sea-level rise of up to seven metres will be caused by melting of either West Antarctic or Greenland ice cap in the near future. Cities such as Beijing, Calcutta and Manhattan would be devastated.

Judge says: "This is distinctly alarmist, and part of Mr. Gore's 'wake-up call.' It is common ground that if indeed Greenland melted, it would release this amount of water, but only after, and over, millennia, so that the Armageddon scenario he predicts, insofar as it suggests that sea-level rises of seven metres might occur in the immediate future, is not in line with the scientific consensus."

Untruth 2

Gore says: Low lying inhabited Pacific atolls are being inundated because of anthropogenic global warming. "That's why the citizens of these Pacific nations have all had to evacuate to New Zealand."

Judge says: "There is no evidence of any such evacuation having yet happened."

Untruth 3

Gore says: The shutting down of the "Ocean Conveyor" would lead to another ice age.

Judge says: "According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it is very unlikely that the Ocean Conveyor (an ocean current known technically as the Meridional Overturning Circulation or thermohaline circulation) will shut down in the future, though it is considered likely that thermohaline circulation may slow down."

Untruth 4

Gore says: Two graphs relating to a period of 650,000 years, one showing rise in CO₂ and one showing rise in temperature, show an exact fit.

Judge says: "Although there is general scientific agreement that there is a connection, the two graphs do not establish what Mr. Gore asserts."

Untruth 5

Gore says: The disappearance of snow on Mt. Kilimanjaro is expressly attributable to global warming.

Judge says: "The scientific consensus is that it cannot be established that the recession of snows on Mt. Kilimanjaro is mainly attributable to human-induced climate change."

Untruth 6

Gore says: The drying up of Lake Chad is a prime example of a catastrophic result of global warming.

Judge says: "It is generally accepted that the evidence remains insufficient to establish such an attribution."

Untruth 7

Gore says: Hurricane Katrina and the consequent devastation in New Orleans is due to global warming.

Judge says: "It is common ground that there is insufficient evidence to show that."

Untruth 8

Gore says: Polar bears have drowned swimming long distances to find ice.

Judge says: "The only scientific study that either side before me can find is one which indicates that four polar bears have recently been found drowned because of a storm."

Untruth 9

Gore says: Coral reefs are bleaching because of global warming.

Judge says: "The actual scientific view, as recorded in the IPCC report, is that, if the temperature were to rise by 1-3 degrees centigrade, there would be increased coral bleaching and widespread coral mortality, unless corals could adapt or acclimatize."

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