

Feature

## The dangers of a post-truth world

The election of a 'post-truth' US president raises important issues for scientists. If rational arguments and proven facts cannot compete against demagoguery and scapegoating, how can we establish evidence-based policies to avert catastrophic climate change and other environmental disasters? **Michael Gross** reports.

*Gas Light* is a stage play by Patrick Hamilton, written in 1938 but set in the Victorian Era. It features a husband terrorising his wife by hiding household items and then accusing her of misplacing them, making her question her own memory and perception of reality. A crucial piece of evidence that eventually helps her uncover her husband's malicious deception is the nightly dimming of the gas lights, which gave the play its name.

Derived from the play, the term gas lighting describes similar types of abuse based on deception, aiming to make the victim question their perspective. As the US journalist Lauren Duca has argued in a widely shared commentary first published in *Teen Vogue*, "Trump won the Presidency by gas light. His rise to power has awakened a force of bigotry by condoning and encouraging hatred, but also by normalizing deception."

While the carefully crafted political deception is as old as politics itself, traditionally the perpetrators tried not to get caught and often had to resign from office if they did. For many politicians, especially those trained as lawyers, the truth was whatever their opponents couldn't prove to be wrong.

By contrast, in the brave new world of Trump and other populist leaders around the world, the rational truth appears to be irrelevant. For their voters, a vague emotional connection of feeling left out and wanting to regain some elusive past greatness outweighs any argument based on verifiable facts. It does not appear to matter any more if the incoming US President releases mutually exclusive statements via his twitter feed — fact-checking is for nerds. As *Time* magazine named him person of the year, the Oxford Dictionaries made 'post-truth' the word of the year.

After two centuries of social progress based on the rationalism of the Enlightenment, from the abolition

of slavery through to equal rights for homosexuals, humanity's path seems to have made a U-turn threatening to go back to darker times. Scientists are left wondering not only how this could happen, but also what they can do to make verifiable scientific truth heard in a post-truth scenario.

### Angry voters

The US presidential election followed in the tracks of the earlier seismic event of 2016, the June referendum in the UK, which produced a narrow majority for leaving the European Union. Like the election result, the Brexit victory has been explained as the result of a large number of voters feeling disenfranchised, because they are not benefiting from recent social progress, largely aimed at minorities, and globalisation, which created a new middle class in the developing world but undermined the social security of workers and employees in the western

world (*Curr. Biol.* (2016) 26, R689–R692).

In his forthcoming book, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, Indian writer Pankaj Mishra argues that the failure of Enlightenment's rationalism to account for emotional needs of people, which was already highlighted by early 20<sup>th</sup> century writers such as Robert Musil, has led to the recent surge in support for anti-intellectual, nationalist strongmen. "Our political and intellectual elites midwived the new 'irrationalism' through a studied indifference to the emotional dislocation and economic suffering induced by modern capitalism," he writes. "Indeed, their universal assumption, hardened since 1989, that there are no alternatives to western-style democracy and capitalism — the famous 'end of history' — is precisely what has made us incapable of grasping the political phenomena shaking the world today."

While these concerns are all good and understandable, the extent to which voters have lined up behind pied pipers of the far right, such as Trump and the candidate for this year's French presidential elections, Marine Le Pen, has surprised and shocked liberal observers. Mishra also includes Russia's Putin and India's Modi in the line-up of leaders favoured by the



**Sudden impact:** Press reactions to the result of the US presidential election. The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* adopted a translation of the REM lyrics: "the end of the world as we know it." (Images with permission from Daily Mirror and © 46/2016 DER SPIEGEL. <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel>.)