

John Witherow
Editor, The Times
The News Building
News UK
1 London Bridge Street SE1 9GF

April 20 2016

Dear John,

We are writing because we are concerned that some of your recent coverage of man-made climate change and energy risks bringing discredit on your paper.

The Times occupies a special place in the history of British journalism, with the best claim of any to having been the nation's newspaper of record. Accordingly, a respected Times is an essential ingredient of a healthy national discourse.

The particular article that stimulated this letter appeared on 23rd February, entitled "Planet is not overheating, says Professor", by your environment editor Ben Webster. It concerned a "study" purporting to show that there is no statistically valid evidence for man-made climate change, and therefore the planet will not warm significantly by the end of the century.

That a paper of The Times' standing chose to report on this study at all is astonishing, given its poor quality. Since your article appeared, scientists have commented, for example, that the method used involves ignoring everything that science has discovered about atmospheric physics since the discovery of greenhouse warming by John Tyndall more than 150 years ago. They have shown that already global warming has proceeded more rapidly than the upper bound of the study's projections. It was performed by someone who is not a climate scientist, used methods that are unverified in the climate change context, was not peer-reviewed, and was commissioned and paid for by an NGO pressure group, the Global Warming Policy Foundation.

On social media it has, literally, been a laughing stock.

Were this article an isolated example of poor quality and/or distorted coverage, it would merit no comment. However, it is but one example, albeit a particularly

egregious one, in a sequence that appears designed systematically to undermine the credibility of climate science and the institutions that carry it out, and the validity of programmes aimed at reducing emissions.

As if to demonstrate the point, a week later you carried another article by Ben Webster (Scientists 'are exaggerating carbon threat to marine life', 1st March) claiming that scientists have exaggerated the significance of ocean acidification – an article that the researcher on whose work it was based, Dr Howard Browman, has criticised using terms such as “cherry-picking”, “sensational” and “disappointing”; while Climate Feedback, an initiative in which climate scientists rank news articles according to accuracy, concluded that this one’s scientific credibility was ‘very low’. This was followed by a comment article by Melanie Phillips (Science is turning back to the dark ages, 4th March), which opened with the same claim as Ben Webster’s article, in either ignorance or disregard of Dr Browman’s comments, and ended by re-treading the amply disproven claim from 2009 that climate scientists had “suppressed research findings to ‘hide the decline’ that had occurred in global temperature”. Three separate inquiries found this had not been the case.

As Editor, you are of course entitled to take whatever editorial line you feel is appropriate. Are you aware, however, how seriously you may be compromising The Times’ reputation by pursuing a line that cleaves so tightly to a particular agenda, and which is based on such flimsy evidence? The implications for your credibility extend beyond your energy and climate change coverage. Why should any reader who knows about energy and climate change respect your political analysis, your business commentary, even your sports reports, when in this one important area you are prepared to prioritise the marginal over the mainstream?

Two aspects are particularly concerning. The first is that neither the quality bar that broadsheet newspapers regularly apply to scientific evidence, nor the simple concept of balance, appear to exist in all of your paper’s reporting on climate change (although we note, for example, that your coverage at the close of the Paris climate summit was both balanced and comprehensive). The second concern is that many of the sub-standard news stories and opinion pieces appear to concern, in some way, GWPF. Whether any newspaper should involve itself repeatedly with any pressure group is a matter for debate; it would be deeply perturbing to find that a paper as

eminent as The Times could allow a small NGO, particularly one whose sources of financing are unknown, a high degree of influence.

Please do not mistake our comments as an attack on press freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth. A healthy, vibrant, inquisitive press is a vital component of a mature democracy, and neither science nor “green” business should be exempt from proper scrutiny. But trust is also essential for any newspaper, particularly one as distinguished as The Times. If you lose trust, you lose everything; and on this issue, you are losing trust.

We recognise that energy and climate change are complex issues in which it is often hard to distinguish fact from fabrication. However, climate science has proven remarkably robust to repeated scrutiny, and multiple lines of evidence indicate that climate change and ocean acidification pose serious and increasing risks for the future. There are divergent views on the best policy response, and these issues need wide discussion. But there is abundant evidence also that decarbonised energy systems can provide energy security at reasonable cost if they are properly planned.

As people who have taken considerable interest in these issues over many years, we would, with respect, urge that you make these facts the centrepiece of debate reflected in your coverage, rather than the viewpoints of one highly marginal and increasingly out-dated pressure group.

Yours sincerely

John Krebs (on behalf of the names listed below)

Lord Krebs Kt FRS

The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Richard Chartres KCVO ChStJ PC FSA

Lord Deben PC

Lord Hunt of Chesterton CB FRS

Baroness King of Cambridge DBE FREng

Lord May of Oxford OM Kt AC FRS FAA

Lord Oxburgh KBE FRS Hon FREng

Lord Puttnam Kt CBE HonFRSA Hon FRPS

Lord Rees of Ludlow OM Kt FRS FREng

The Earl of Selborne GBE DL FRS

Lord Stern Kt FRS FBA

Lord Turner of Ecchinswell

Lord Willis of Knaresborough