

# Owen Paterson's controversial speech to climate change sceptics looks to be riddled with inaccuracies

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Owen Paterson, until recently the environment secretary, will be speaking to the Global Warming Policy Foundation, a think tank known for its climate change scepticism. [Bob Ward](#) looks at what he will say, writing that Paterson is in desperate need of some extra tuition from climate scientists.



More details are emerging of serious flaws in [a controversial speech](#) that the former environment secretary, Owen Paterson, is due to deliver to climate change 'sceptics' on 15 October. Paterson is sure to receive an enthusiastic welcome from the audience at the [Global Warming Policy Foundation](#), the campaign group set up by Lord Lawson to lobby against government policies to reduce emissions of greenhouse gas emissions.

With the Foundation's public relations machine on full throttle, Paterson has been enjoying [effusive coverage](#) from right-wing newspapers which share his contempt for environmentalists, who he describes collectively as "the green blob". But Paterson, who was sacked from the Cabinet in July, will undermine the credibility of his argument with significantly inaccurate and misleading assertions about energy and climate change policy.

First, he will claim that including more sources of renewable energy, such as wind farms, in the UK's power system risks "the lights going out". But this prophecy of doom simply does not stand up to scrutiny. Wind farms, of course, generate variable amounts of power depending on weather conditions, but this can be managed in a number of ways, including by providing back-up electricity from gas-fired power stations. Indeed, the Government established [a capacity market](#) to create such a safeguard against potential shortages through the Energy Act which received Royal Assent last year. Paterson knows this because [he voted for it](#) in Parliament.

It is true that the UK needs about £100 billion in investment in new energy infrastructure by 2020, and without it the power system would struggle to meet future demand. But Paterson's suggestion that the Climate Change Act should be scrapped is just the kind of intervention by a politician that creates uncertainty for the private sector and undermines the confidence of investors. It is the risk caused by inconsistent policy-making, as advocated by Paterson's reversal on the Climate Change Act (which [he also voted for](#)), that threatens to plunge the UK into darkness, rather than the intermittency of renewable energy sources.



The second glaring hole in his argument relates to his lack of knowledge and understanding of the risks of climate change. Paterson has repeatedly shown that he struggles with the details of the science of climate change, but in

his speech will claim to “readily accept the main points of the greenhouse theory”. This is hardly a remarkable concession, since it is about 200 years since Joseph Fourier first identified [the greenhouse effect](#) caused by the Earth’s atmosphere, and 150 years since John Tyndall demonstrated in a laboratory that carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas.

But Paterson will also state: “Over the past 35 years, the Earth’s atmosphere has warmed nothing like as fast as forecast and over the last 18 years it has not warmed at all, according to some sources”. This shows that he has not consulted reliable scientific sources of information. It is simply untrue that the Earth has not warmed since 1995. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change points out in its comprehensive and authoritative [recent assessment](#), global average surface temperature has been increasing at a rate of about 0.05 centigrade degrees per decade since 1998.

This is lower than the long-term rate of warming since 1951 of 0.12 centigrade degrees per decade, but the slowdown is due to the temporary effect of natural factors, such as an increase in the amount of volcanic aerosols, which tend to cause cooling, in the atmosphere, and a cyclical reduction in the amount of radiation from the Sun.

However, the long-term projections by climate scientists continue to show that by the end of the century, if greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere continue to grow at the current rate, global average temperature could be three degrees or more higher than at the start of the Industrial Revolution, when the widespread burning of fossil fuels began. Such levels of global warming would take the Earth’s temperature to its highest level since the Pliocene Epoch three million years ago, and would create a prehistoric climate that modern *Homo sapiens* has not experienced before.

The lives and livelihoods of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people across the planet would be transformed and disrupted by [the impacts](#) of such a change in climate, as sea levels rise, deserts grow, and patterns of extreme weather intensify and shift. For Paterson to overlook these risks, because of his flawed interpretation of cherry-picked facts about recent temperature trends, shows that he is in desperate need of some extra tuition from climate scientists. And until he shows a willingness to fully embrace the scientific evidence, he will struggle to have his pronouncements on energy and climate change taken seriously by anyone other than fellow ‘sceptics’.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [Policy Exchange](#) CC BY 2.0*

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