

## False Balance in Climate Reporting Reveals BBC's Sensitivity to Political Pressure



*As the BBC is criticised again for its coverage of climate change, this time in a Parliamentary report, **Nicholas Robin** argues that the need to head off accusations of left-wing bias in the lead up to its Charter renewal puts the BBC under political pressure to present a “false balance”.*

A **stinging report just published** by the Science and Technology Select Committee has criticised the BBC for its coverage of climate science. The year-long Parliamentary inquiry found that “BBC News teams continue to make mistakes in their coverage of climate science by giving opinions and scientific fact the same weight”. The cross-party committee of MPs calls on the BBC to develop editorial guidelines on the facts of climate science and have recommended it introduce rules to prevent programmes giving undue weight to commentators or lobbyists whose opinion does not reflect the balance of scientific evidence. In the lead up to Charter renewal however, this might be a big ask.

### **A prime example of false balance**

The report follows recent **protests over the BBC's climate coverage** sparked by a debate on BBC Radio Four's flagship news show, the Today programme. On 13 February, with much of the West Country under water, the programme introduced **a debate** on whether climate change was a factor in the extreme weather hitting Britain. Instead of inviting two scientists on to debate this scientific question however, the programme's editor chose to ‘balance’ the assessment of leading climate scientist Sir Brian Hoskins Professor of Meteorology at Reading University, with Lord Lawson, a sceptical politician with no scientific qualifications who heads **a ‘think tank’** that lobbies against policies designed to limit global warming.

Of course, as a previous Secretary of State for Energy and Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, is clearly qualified to debate the policy response to climate change or whether renewable energy is a cost-effective way of mitigating the problem. However with a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, he is not qualified to debate whether a particular extreme weather event is linked to climate change with a top climate scientist. The Today programme debate, was a vivid example of ‘false balance’.

### **Past “Undue attention to marginal opinion”**

Concerns about false balance in science reporting are not new. Several years ago the BBC Trust commissioned geneticist Professor Steve Jones to conduct **a review of impartiality and accuracy of the BBC's coverage of science**. The Jones report, published in July 2011, concluded that in general the BBC's science output was of high quality, but that an “over-rigid” insistence on due impartiality risked giving “undue attention to marginal opinion” on scientific questions.

The BBC and other media “in their desire to give an objective account of what appears to be an emerging controversy...face the danger of being trapped into false balance; into giving equal coverage to the views of a determined but deluded minority.’ This problem of false balance was particularly pronounced when it came to climate change because ‘denialists’ use rhetoric ‘to give the appearance of debate”, Jones warned.

The BBC Trust appointed a Science Editor in response to Jones report, but pointedly rejected his recommendation that it should avoid false balance in “what is essentially a fact based field”. David

Jordan, the BBC's Head of Editorial Policy, explained the decision **in evidence** to the Science and Technology Committee inquiry:

*Professor Jones said...we should regard climate science as settled in effect and, therefore... we should not hear from dissenting voices on the science of climate change. We did not agree with that because we think the BBC's role is to reflect all views and opinions in society in its output, and we have continued to do that.*

### Political pressure for 'balance'

The Science and Technology Committee report notes the BBC's rejection of Jones' recommendations, but does not explore the political reasons the BBC may have felt unable to accept that recommendation. Arguably however, the false balance that the BBC presents on climate change is partly a result of BBC's susceptibility to sometimes subtle or tacit political pressure.

As Tim Luckhurst from the University of Kent's Centre for Journalism has argued, because the BBC is "perpetually anxious to secure renewal of its and to obtain a generous licence fee settlement" it has a delicate relationship with "governments of all parties".<sup>[1]</sup> In other words, the BBC is highly sensitive to accusations that it is leaning too far to one side in any contentious political argument.

Political balance is of course a cornerstone of the **BBC's Editorial Guidelines**. The Corporation is committed to applying 'due impartiality' to all its subject matter "so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under-represented". The guidelines also commit the BBC to "achieving due accuracy", but go on to say that "accuracy is not simply a matter of getting facts right. If an issue is controversial, relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be considered".

This all sounds reasonable, of course, but when it comes to a scientific issue with documented empirical evidence supporting certain conclusions, is it valid to balance peer-reviewed research with pure opinion? If a scientific issue becomes politicised though, as climate change policy undoubtedly has, it is easy to see how editors following BBC editorial guidelines on political impartiality may feel obliged to balance discussions about the science with commentators who disagree.

The Jones review itself pointed out that the BBC had faced complaints about its climate coverage from "an organised response by determined climate-change deniers". Following the Jones review, **Lord Lawson's lawyers wrote to the BBC Trust** in the *Sunday Times* and publicly warned the Corporation that it "ought to shred that section of the Jones review and revert to the impartiality laid down in its charter".

There was a hint of the political pressure the BBC comes under in David Jordan's **oral evidence** to the Committee. He revealed that he had held meetings with two prominent Conservative climate change deniers:

*Only a few weeks ago I had a long meeting with Lord Lawson about his view of climate change. Not that very long ago, I had a long meeting with Peter Lilley about his view about of climate change. We have long meetings with scientists who take different views about climate change and what is going on in the world, and whether there is or is not a standstill in global temperatures. We are constantly monitoring all of that with politicians, scientists and everybody else who has a view.*

### With Charter renewal looming...

With the BBC Charter Review due for renewal in 2016, it may be wishful thinking to imagine that the BBC will stop inviting Conservative climate sceptics on air. The fear of being accused of left

wing bias will probably continue to make the BBC unusually sensitive to pressure from those on the right who deny the science or seriousness of climate change – despite their limited numbers.

Nevertheless, the cross-party select committee report may itself provide a political counter-weight to that pressure. One imagines that the BBC Science and Environment team – who do take care to get the facts right on climate change – may even be quietly pleased that their colleagues in News and Current Affairs have been ticked off by the Select Committee.

Perhaps the Today programme will think more carefully about inviting a non-scientist or lobbyist on to question the scientific accuracy of a leading Professor again. As the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, Andrew Miller MP, **said** on the Today programme this morning, “you wouldn’t give equal time to pro-smokers...in the case of smoking and lung related disease”, so why do it on climate change?

*This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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[1] See Luckhursts article in *After Leveson? The future for British journalism* Mair, J. (ed) (2013) Arima Publishing

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