

The Rt Hon Lord Lawson
Chairman
The Global Warming Policy Foundation
1 Carlton House Terrace
LONDON
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From Paul Nurse

8 March 2013
Our ref: PN/JB

Dear Lord Lawson

Thank you for your letter of 25 February. You point out that I am not a climate scientist (I am of course a biologist and cancer scientist), however as a research scientist I do understand very well the importance of reliable observation, experiment, and consistent rational argument. As a member of two eminent national science academies, the Royal Society in the UK and the National Academy of Sciences in the USA, I am also fortunate to have ready access to the most distinguished climate research scientists in the world for advice on climate matters.

If by pointing out that I am not a climate scientist you mean to imply that I should not be commenting on climate science, then if you are to be consistent, there is even less of a case for you as a politician to make comments in this area. In fact, I think it is quite legitimate for both of us to talk about climate policy, but before doing so we need to have access to the highest quality climate science. I am not sure that you are receiving the best advice, and I would be very happy to put you in contact with distinguished active climate research scientists if you think that would be useful.

My main concern is that your belief that warming has not happened over the last 15 years, something you regularly repeat in the media, would lead you to conclude that we need not worry about the possibility of warming between now and the end of the century – that is certainly the impression that is given to others. On the specific question of recent temperature changes, my expert climate scientist colleagues have referred me to global temperature data collected by NASA satellites which show that the decade 2000 - 2009 was warmer than 1990 - 1999, which in turn was warmer than 1980 - 1989. Scientists must consider the totality of data and analyse it appropriately. Cherry picking data may be good politics but it is usually bad science. In your letter you make reference to your book on climate change – I am familiar both with your book and with commentaries which do not agree with it.

With regard to my views on the role of scientists in policy making I have never suggested that only scientists should decide the appropriate policy response to climate change. Quite the opposite in fact, so I do not know who has advised you to the contrary. What I have said is that first we need to get the science right and then we need the public debate. We both agree that policy makers must take many factors into account when determining policy but providing the scientific evidence that underpins informed debate is the responsibility of scientists who are expert in the area concerned. Fortunately, for decades UK politicians of various political views (including the present Government) have taken this approach and set generally sensible policies for tackling climate change. They have ignored the excessive views expressed by extreme sceptics or catastrophists, and have followed the consensus position of the majority of expert climate scientists. I recommend you do the same, and armed with that reliable knowledge and understanding, enter the public debate as a distinguished policy maker.

The economic issues are as you say very important. I am not an economist but as I am sure you know there are eminent economists who have concluded that from a global perspective, including the developing world, the costs of not taking action to tackle climate change could be greater than the costs of taking action. This area is obviously one that should be part of the public debate.

It is important to have a range of opinions in the public debate about climate change and the GWPF that you chair could play a role in that debate, but it seems to have lost its way. The Foundation needs to have more mainstream active and expert climate scientists giving it advice. It should also focus more on science and policy rather than on personal attacks on individuals with whom the GWPF disagrees. For example, you will recall that last year the GWPF published named personal attacks on four successive Presidents of the Royal Society.

It does not help that you will not reveal who funds the GWPF, because policy discussion should be carried out in an open and transparent manner. If you do not reveal who is funding the Foundation then it will be assumed that you are acting primarily as a lobby group, which diminishes your credibility and ability to influence the debate. As mentioned before in this letter, I would be happy to put you in touch with people who can offer the Foundation informed scientific advice, should you wish, so you can participate more constructively and in a more informed way in this important debate.

Yours sincerely

Paul Nurse

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Sir Paul Nurse
President
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February 25, 2013

Dear Sir Paul

My attention has been drawn to a speech you gave last month at Melbourne University, in which you chose to criticise me by name in terms which bear no relation to the truth. In the interests of accuracy, I have obtained a full transcript. I recognise that, as a distinguished geneticist, you are not a climate scientist, and may therefore feel ill at ease discussing the complex issue of climate policy. But that is no excuse for wanton misrepresentation both of the issues involved and of my own position.

So far as the latter is concerned, you claim that I “would choose two points and say ‘look, no warming’s taking place’, knowing that all the other points that you chose in the 20 years around it would not support his case”. That is a lie. I have always made clear that there was a modest degree of recorded global warming during the 20th century (see, for example, my book *An Appeal to Reason*, which you have clearly not taken the trouble to read). However, so far from choosing any arbitrary ‘two points’, I was drawing attention to the fact that this warming trend appears to have ceased, since – contrary to the predictions of what you describe as “consensus scientific opinion” – there has been no further recorded global warming at all for at least the past 15 years, as even the IPCC Chairman, Dr Pachauri, has now conceded. Whatever the precise reason for this, it cannot simply be dismissed or denied.

Again, you assert that the reason I do not share your position is that I am one of those “who have political or ideological views that lead them to be unhappy with the actions that would be necessary [*sic*] should global warming be due to human activity... Because these actions are likely to include measures which involve greater concerted world action, curtailing the freedom of individuals or companies and nations, and curbing some kinds of industrial activity, potentially risking economic growth.”

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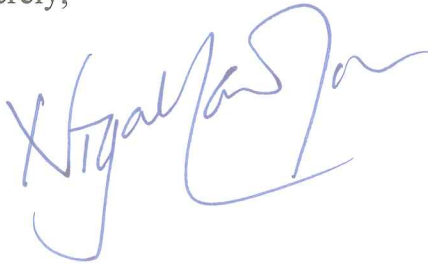
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There is nothing ‘political or ideological’ about my dissent from your position. It is true that I value individual freedom, and consider it immoral to be recommending measures which would hold back growth in the developing world and condemn hundreds of millions to avoidable poverty. But my objection to the policy you favour (see, again, my book, where it is clearly set out) is that it is not cost-effective (even if it were globally attainable, which the recent collapse of the Kyoto process suggests is not the case); and that, should an active policy response prove necessary, the only rational course is adaptation.

On the wider issue, I cannot accept your contention that only ‘scientists’ should decide the appropriate policy response. The role of scientists (or, rather, climate scientists) is to try and understand the complex science and its implications, and to convey that understanding, with all its attendant uncertainties, to democratically elected policy makers, who are then responsible for framing policy, taking full account not merely of the science but also, crucially, of the economics – which, insofar as you consider it, you appear to dismiss as not being “as evidence-based or as rational as science”.

In conclusion, I hope that, on reflection, you will recognise that there should be a difference between the behaviour appropriate to a President of the Royal Society and acting as a shop steward for some kind of scientists’ closed shop. Not to do so can only bring the Royal Society into further disrepute, which cannot be in the public interest.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'X Gordon Lawson', written in a cursive style.

The Rt Hon Lord Lawson
Chairman