

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

4 June 2013
Our ref: PN/JB

Dear Lord Lawson

I tire of your rude and aggressive letters and begin to wonder whether it is worth the effort of trying to help you.

Montford attacked me for criticising anti-science remarks made in the US, the ones which I quoted in my last letter. Either you are unaware of this nonsense published by the GWPF, or you are now distancing yourself from the Montford report. For your information the Montford comment is on page 36 of the GWPF report and the New Scientist article he criticised is attached.

Yours sincerely



Paul Nurse

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EDITORIAL

Stamp out anti-science

It is time to reject political movements that turn their backs on science

IF YOU respect science you will probably be disturbed by the following opinions.

On evolution: intelligent design is "a legitimate scientific theory that should be taught in science class". And don't believe in "a theory that human beings – thinking, loving beings – originated from fish that sprouted legs and crawled out of the sea or from monkeys who eventually swung down from the trees."

On the use of embryonic stem cell research to cure diseases: it should be shut down because it involves "the wholesale destruction of human life".

On climate change: variations are "natural, cyclical environmental trends". That "we can't say with assurance that human activities cause weather changes" and that climate problems in Texas are best solved through "days of prayer for rain".

You would probably be even more disturbed to be told that these are the opinions expressed by potential Republican candidates for the US presidential nomination (see page 6). It's alarming that a country which leads the world in science – the

"If those who are anti-science in the US are allowed to carry the day it will hurt the economy"

home of Benjamin Franklin, Richard Feynman and Jim Watson – might be turning its back on science. How can this be happening? What can be done?

One problem is treating scientific discussion as if it were political debate. When some politicians try to sway public opinion, they employ the tricks of the debating chamber: cherry-picking data, ignoring the

consensus opinions of experts, adept use of a sneer or a misplaced comparison, reliance on the power of rhetoric rather than argument. They can often get away with this because the media rely too much on confrontational debate in place of reasoned discussion.

It is essential, in public issues, to separate science from politics and ideology. Get the science right first, then discuss the political implications. We scientists also need to work harder at discussing the issues better and more fully in the public arena, clearly identifying what we know and admitting what we don't know.

Another concern is science teaching in schools. Is it good enough to produce citizens able to cope with public discussions about science? We have to ensure that science is being taught in schools – not pseudoscience. With the rise of free and faith schools and the academies in the UK, measures need to be put in place to safeguard science classes. This has been difficult to maintain particularly in the US.

We need to emphasise why the scientific process is such a reliable generator of knowledge – with its respect for evidence, for scepticism, for consistency of approach, for the constant testing of ideas. Everyone should know and understand why the processes that lead to astronomy are more reliable than those that lead to astrology.

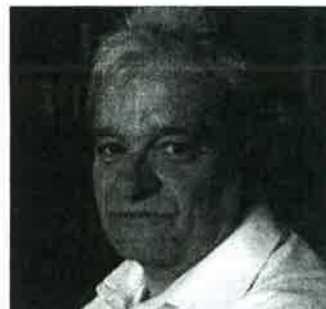
Finally, scientific leaders have a responsibility to expose the bunkum. We scientists have not always been proactive about this. We need to be vigilant about what is being said in the public arena. We need to be vigilant about what politicians are publicising about science and take them on when

necessary. At elections, scientists should ensure that science is on the agenda and nonsense is exposed. If that nonsense is extreme enough then the response should be very public.

If those who are anti-science in the US are allowed to carry the day it will ultimately hurt the American economy. The best scientists will head for the established leaders of science, such as the UK and emerging powerhouses such as China and India. But beyond that it will damage the US's standing in the world. Who will be able to take its leaders seriously? They may not care, but they should.

Science is worth fighting for. It helps us understand the world and ourselves better and will benefit all humanity.

We have to hope that the people of the US will see through some of the nonsense being foisted on them by vocal minorities. It is time to reject political movements that reject science and take us back into the dark rather than forward into a more enlightened future. ■



PROFILE

Paul Nurse, who shared the Nobel prize for medicine in 2001, is president of the Royal Society. From 2003 until last year he was also president of Rockefeller University, New York

