Thoughts about arguing climate change issues

How can we argue the climate case? How can we counter deniers' or delayers' spin? Is there any way to overcome the fake news agenda in a post-truth world?

This is a 'briefing doc' for people concerned about climate change and how to argue the case for action – people who know it's a serious matter but who feel the need for some ideas as to how to talk or write more convincingly about it. We hope that this will help you to see the wood as well as the trees. To find the paths and avoid the pitfalls. We think that understanding climate change issues and grappling successfully with them can be simpler than it sometimes seems to be. Hopefully, this briefing doc will enable you to see them all with more clarity and to communicate the issues with more confidence – as we all must.

First of all, are we really "world-beating"? It will be claimed, and we must accept, that Britain has performed better than many other countries over the years since 1990 – the baseline year from which performance is traditionally measured.

Mostly this was, as the CCC (Climate Change Committee) says, because we were picking (and have now picked) the low-hanging fruit. We stopped using so much coal, the dirtiest fossil fuel, replacing it with gas, a less dirty one. We also made considerable inroads into wind (offshore only, in the last decade) and some solar electricity. We have, as a result, reduced our carbon emissions (not enough, but somewhat) while growing the economy. This is better than some, but it is insufficient if we are to stay below the Paris Agreement target of 1.5C or hit our own legally determined targets. (Insufficient by a factor of about two if we include our 'exported emissions' – those emitted overseas on our behalf when producing stuff we will import & use.)

We also introduced "world-beating" legislation – the Climate Change Act 2008 & the legally binding commitment to Net Zero 2050 (recently updated to a reduction of 78% (on 1990 levels) by 2035) which is backed by legally instituted carbon budgets and a Net Zero Strategy. We were genuinely early to legislate, but in 2022 the High Court found our government unlawful in that it was failing to reach its own legally set targets and thus failing to reach the trajectory necessary to get to net zero 2050 and stay below that 1.5C limit.

The "world-beating" meme is, in other words, very partial and misleading. Fine words and sterling aspirations, but demonstrably inadequate action. It's what we have called "sedative spin" on our website – www.RobertCourtsWatch.com.

It can (and will) also be argued that we emit a relatively small proportion of the world's emissions. Deniers or delayists claim we emit some 1% of world GHGs (greenhouse gases, mainly carbon dioxide but also methane). This is spin, though, because if we include (as we must) our exported emissions and aviation emissions we actually emit some 2% of the global total. This is not insignificant and reducing it would make a meaningful difference. It is also the case that as an early and enthusiastic industrialising country we have a very large historical carbon footprint accumulated behind us, in global terms. Our per capita emissions also remain high and the highest emitters carry the greatest responsibility to reduce and will make the most difference to global totals if they do. And someone has to set an example.

What about 'alternative facts' and the confusion of detail? Let us avoid the quicksands and thickets of 'my-facts-vs-your-facts' terrain and stay on the paths of clear, obvious and true generalities everyone can understand. We will, for instance, face statements such as "we have reduced our greenhouse gas emissions by 25% since 2010" and there will be some truth and some spin in some of these observations. We may (or may not!) be able to point out perfectly valid facts in counter-argument but this will be greeted by yet more statistics which will also be a mix of truth and spin. In other words, we'll just get bogged down in conflicting and obfuscating details – we'll be trapped in sedative spin.

The outlines of the climate issue, however, are simple, comprehensible and unanswerable and we should set up camp here, where we are unassailable. Fossil fuels and greenhouse gases are the problem – they are the single cause of climate change. They are not the solution, even though a diminishing use of them will be necessary during the 'transition to net zero'.

Once you understand the cause of a problem, you also understand the cure for it. We can safely camp here.

(This is a point at which fruitful debate might take place between us and someone (like Robert Courts) who claims to understand that fossil fuels cause global warming. Science says leaving the fossil fuel era must happen at maximum possible speed if we are to prevent irretrievable climate breakdown, while Robert and his ilk say such haste will destroy our economy and disrupt lives. This is an argument we should listen to, as there is some truth and considerable complication washing about in it. We consider it more fully later in this document.)

How certain can we be of our case?

The world's scientists agree about climate change - its cause and its consequences. There is longstanding scientific consensus and we cannot wilt on this question. The

science is absolutely clear and unequivocal and we must be too. ‘The scientists’ - thousands and thousands of them from all around the planet - agree overwhelmingly and have done for years. There is no respectable room for doubt (and see later) and it’s actually terribly simple. Climate change is caused by the accumulation of greenhouse gases, themselves mostly emitted by the burning of fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas. (Increasing amounts of methane - a very powerful greenhouse gas - are simply leaking from warming, onetime permafrost tundra.)

Science and mathematics tell us, unequivocally, that we already have a great deal more of these fossil fuels to hand than we can safely burn. They have calculated a ‘carbon budget’ describing roughly how much more fossil fuel we may safely burn. (We’re getting through it at an unsustainable rate.) If we did burn more than this budget, we’d send the global temperature rise to at least 4C. Runaway climate change tipping points (Arctic melt, tundra melt & methane release, gulf stream collapse etc) would take over and we would have lost any hope of control or row-back. Earth would become increasingly hostile, everywhere, to human life and all we’d be able to do is watch and scrabble to survive.

As a result of this terrible and universal understanding, the world’s scientists also agree, overwhelmingly, that we must dramatically and immediately reduce our fossil fuel use and dramatically and immediately deploy alternatives. (Sufficient alternatives already exist and we continue, and will reliably continue, to discover and perfect more.) The scientists agree, overwhelmingly, that looking for, and exploiting, more fossil fuels is dangerous madness and must stop. They agree that if we don’t do this, catastrophe will overtake us, our children and their children. Civilisation will disintegrate around them, and we will have ensured this.

At this point, you may find yourself up against a real, or affected, contempt for, and willingness to disregard, science. This is a major block to rational progress but is usually based on a suspiciously convenient misunderstanding of the fundamental characteristics of the ‘scientific method’. Science is intellectual humility expressed as the rigorous questioning of data and the passionate embrace of uncertainty until such time as you have overwhelming evidence, at which point you become certain.

Thus, for instance, many recent extreme weather events are said by science, with appropriate modesty, only to be *possibly* the result of climate change, often expressed as a percentage probability range. The likelihood, or probability, that a virulent event may have been caused by climate change may be said to be between 75% - 90%, for example. Scientific illiterates will then claim that science “doesn’t know” whether the one was caused by the other and extrapolate that to mean that we can say that it wasn’t and behave accordingly. (As dramatically portrayed in the film ‘Don’t Look Up’!)

Their whole argument rests upon ignorance, real or assumed, which may pass as reasonable and forgivable in a sloppy and insincere post-truth environment. We must not succumb. Reality is real, even if not always and perfectly understood as yet. Real causes are real and have real consequences. Facts really are facts and time always tells. Chickens really do come home to roost.

Science is often openly uncertain about the finer details of climate change – exact quantities or precise timings, for instance – but it is crystal clear when it states that it is absolutely certain that climate change is real and accelerating, and what its probable outcomes will be. (Thus far, it has also to be said, the predictions of science have proven to have been accurate, but very frequently actual results have been towards the worst end of the predicted ranges of possibility. In general, things are proving to be rather worse than we might have hoped.)

Selective disbelief of science is not intellectually respectable. It is a jaw-dropping species of convenient ignorance, necessitating considerable arrogance and often sustaining dogmatic opinions for venal reasons. I have no idea how it may be countered other than to point out that the disbeliever almost certainly uses a smart phone, a computer, a car and air travel – all rather scientific items which work wonderfully well, repeatedly and reliably. When ill, they consult a medically qualified scientist.

In summer 2021, Robert Courts told Hugo that he did not accept the scientific consensus on climate change, nor the conclusions of reports from the CCC or IPCC. He said that to suggest that that we must accept their outcomes was “dictatorial”. However, he has since written (to Hugo) on 10th October 2022 that “*climate change is the most significant, existential issue of our generation*.” Perhaps a greater familiarity with science can change minds and if this is a result of Robert reading it, and if it is a real change, we salute him.

We’ve been talking about ‘science’. What are the authorities we mostly use under that blanket term? Here are a few of the most important, but there are many, many more and they all link profusely with other authorities and specialisms.

The ‘triple c’ (CCC) is our own Committee on Climate Change, established by parliament under the 2008 Climate Change Act as an independent body of expertise specifically tasked with oversight of performance of the government of the day on climate change issues. It produces an annual report, by law, which the government is required, by law, to read and act upon. The CCC is increasingly scathing about government performance. Its data were used in the High Court in 2022 when HM government were found to be unlawfully failing to reach their own legally set climate-related targets.

The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) was established under UN auspices and collects, correlates and analyses the work of thousands of scientists worldwide. It makes its data and conclusions freely available and can be regarded as the most authoritative voice on the subject. It has recently published an overview of climate science to date. It's grim reading and Antonio Guterres (UN Secretary General) is derisive on governmental inaction.

The International Energy Agency also researches and presents climate change data, internationally. It was the International Energy Agency which stated, unequivocally, in 2021, that all new exploration for and exploitation of fossil fuels had to cease by the end of that year if the famous 1.5C rise was to be avoided.

The Grantham Institute, based in the LSE (London School of Economics), is another authoritative source. They published the Stern Report in 2006, which reached similar conclusions to today's Skidmore Review. (Quote: "… the benefits of strong and early action far outweigh the economic costs of not acting.")

It's de rigeur to deride the Guardian newspaper in some circles, of course, so we should not, perhaps, deploy it as a main source, but the fact is that it often produces excellent summary articles full of links to reliable sources we can quote. They have written about 'carbon bombs' and (even scarier) 'methane bombs', for example.

Many very professionally august 'names' have spoken clearly and forcefully on climate change and the necessity to act urgently – Sir David King (previously Chief Scientific Adviser to HM Government); Richard Hughes (chair of the Office for Budget Responsibility); Mark Carney (ex-governor of the bank of England); Sir David Attenborough, of course, and a plethora more.

We are 'right' and right to be concerned, and actively so.

There are arguments, based on selective information and disinformation, that 'going green' will cost impossible quantities of money. The Stern and Skidmore reports, among many other authoritative sources, refute these claims absolutely and roundly, pointing out that we can easily afford it and that inaction will cost very much more, of course. (The CCC estimates the overall cost as somewhere around 1% of GDP and we often spend this sort of money on important items – pandemics, for example.)

A particularly egregious example of this genre of alarmist disinformation emanates from Steve Baker and a stirring rebuttal from the Grantham Institute is linked below. It's worth reading to keep sense in the air and feet on the ground.

https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Ward-letter-to-Steve-Baker-MP-28-May-2021.pdf

The 'stone-age argument' may also be deployed against climate action. (Robert Courts deployed it against Hugo in 2021. "Going green", he asserted, would take Britain back to an "agrarian, subsistence economy".) This argument must be faced and taken seriously, although major reports utterly refute it (Stern and Skidmore, for example, but all the authorities quoted above concur absolutely).

Redirecting an economy rapidly away from fossil fuels towards alternatives will selectively disrupt, so there is genuine reason for concern. It's ferociously complicated in terms of many things – employment shifts, ownership & legality challenges, infrastructure demands, public opinion, political opportunism and on and on. We cannot deny any of this or claim it's a simple proposition, but we can (and must) hold fast to the fact (and it is a fact) that not attempting these changes will result in certain disaster. We know it will. The choice is not real. Rocks and hard places come to mind. It's net zero or not zero, very stark. *Not zero*, we know for sure, will end very badly, *net zero* at least gives us a fighting chance – if we move fast enough.

And according to all the authorities we have ever read, including Skidmore, if we could get to the other side of the transition to net zero – if we actually withdrew from the fossil fuel era - we'd find we had a good, solid economy full of good, solid jobs. Net zero, they all say, is an opportunity, not a cost. It won't ruin our economy, it'll build a better, sustainable one.

Anxiety about the inevitable disruption that transition to net zero would entail, over quite a long short-term, is perfectly understandable, all the same. It does demand change, even if relatively contained and local, and all change trails anxiety. That doesn't make it wrong, or impossible.

Our most effective counter-argument may rest on the utterly extraordinary nature of the emergency we increasingly accept that we face today. Almost every council in Britain, after all, has declared a 'climate emergency' as have the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd. The Westminster parliament approved a motion declaring an 'environment and climate emergency' in 2019, although it never quite made it into law. In an agreed emergency, urgency is a demand, and it is 'politics' which must deliver.

The situation we face is so profoundly threatening, and so all-encompassing, that it may justifiably be compared to a world war. In such dire and extreme circumstances, 'normality' is willingly suspended and draconian actions and upheavals, unthinkable at

any other time, are widely accepted in pursuit of an overriding, imperative, existential purpose.

And if we do not take climate change seriously, we will indeed be reduced to “an agrarian, subsistence economy”, except that we will probably then be in a permanent state of drought / flood unpredictability in which any crops we plant will likely fail, as they do so often in warmer climates today – the canaries in our coalmine. (In the words of Richard Hughes, Chair of the OBR, speaking with Laura Kuensberg on March 26th 2023, for one example, our agriculture will have become “non-viable”.) “Non-viability” of food production is a predictable, and predicted, outcome of continuing with the business-as-usual, fossil-fuel-based economy of today.

Our argument is therefore that there is no credible alternative to the alternative. Climate inaction is our real enemy. It is not we who are proposing to revisit the stone age!