



The Today Programme
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Lords post box.

Dear Lord Pearson,

Thank you for your letter. I am very sorry that it has taken me so long to reply. Your initial e-mail went to the wrong address (for future reference, the correct one is ceri.thomas.01@bbc.co.uk) so your message took a little while to find its way to me.

You raise a number of specific points about Roger Harrabin's piece but I think it might be helpful to offer a few thoughts on your broader criticism first. Let me start by pointing out that the BBC is not simply committed to impartiality - it is committed to "due impartiality" defined by the BBC Editorial guidelines as follows:

" It requires us to be fair and open minded when examining the evidence and weighing all the material facts, as well as being objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. It does not require the representation of every argument or facet of every argument on every occasion or an equal division of time for each view."

Which brings me to my first main point; although there are undoubtedly some who disagree, there is a great consensus among scientists that the world is warming and that the change is at least partly driven by anthropogenic emissions. This position is held by almost all the world's leading scientific societies and by all the governments which signed the IPCC report to which you refer. When Roger Harrabin refers to "official" science I do not believe he is guilty of "lazy shorthand". It seems to me that he is looking for a succinct way of narrowing the definition, not claiming that debate over the science is closed. Having said all that, however, I share some of your concern at the notion of describing even overwhelmingly-accepted science as "official". I will discuss this with Roger and see if, between us, we can agree a better shorthand term.

In reporting on the issue of climate change the BBC, by its own guidelines, must give due weight to the evidence. As the EU, the British government (including opposition parties) and the US government accept that climate change is happening and that emissions need to be cut it is understandable that most of our reporting starts from that basis. It does not mean we will never give airtime to those who disagree but we will not - indeed should not - give them equal airtime.

Secondly, I fear that you overestimate what can be achieved within the constraints of a live slot on "Today". You rightly recognise our duty to provide balanced coverage over time, rather than within an individual item, but you may not have spotted that the question of the impact on business of the EU's proposals had been examined separately in other editions of the programme by our Europe correspondents Mark Mardell and Jonny Diamond. Roger Harrabin did not explicitly address it again in this two-way, but your transcript records correctly that he was only able to answer two questions on this occasion. It is not surprising, perhaps, that he did not deal with every facet of the debate.

On your more detailed criticism, let me take the points you raise one by one.

You complain that the use of the phrase 'climate change' is sloppy and misleading. But in the context of the item we are discussing I cannot see any real danger that the audience would misunderstand its meaning. The term 'climate change' has become so widespread as a description for the current cycle of warming that it is hard to think that there is a serious risk that anyone would have been misled.



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You also claim that Roger Harrabin argued that it was 'absolutely vital' if the EU were to retain its credibility at the UN that the 20% cut in greenhouse gases should be accepted. Your own transcript makes clear that Roger was directly quoting the EU President Mr Barroso, not expressing his own view.

Finally, let me turn to the topic of the problems faced by US car manufacturers which occupied the opening section of our conversation with Roger Harrabin. Modern, live broadcasting places heavy demands on correspondents. As well as demonstrating knowledge, impartiality and other important attributes, we ask them to develop a fluent, natural style, and to 'fit in' with all the programmes on which they broadcast, including "Today". In taking his cue from the preceding item, and relating aspects of it to discussions taking place within the EU, Roger was attempting to achieve the sort of seamlessness which we as programme producers sometimes encourage. I do not think his attempt was wholly successful because it was not sufficiently comprehensive, and had the effect of giving too much prominence to one possible cause of the manufacturers' problems over many others. That, perhaps, is the danger of straying 'off-piste' on live radio. But whilst I agree that this section of our conversation could have gone better, I do not think it is reasonable to use it as evidence of an in-built bias in our approach or Roger's.

Overall then I cannot accept your characterisation of the piece as biased or in breach of the BBC's Editorial Guidelines. You may, incidentally be interested to see Roger Harrabin's article on our website examining arguments against current climate policy.

Yours sincerely

Ceri Thomas

Editor 'Today'



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