[GB] Regulator finds BBC in breach of due impartiality rule for failure to challenge climate change sceptic

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The Ofcom Broadcasting Code now applies to the BBC and complaints of breaches are considered by Ofcom, the UK communications regulator (see IRIS 2017-5/23). Two complaints were made by leading scientists about an interview on climate change with Lord Lawson, former Chancellor of the Exchequer, a leading climate change sceptic, on the BBC's flagship news and current affairs radio programme, Today. The complainants considered that the BBC had breached the Code's requirements of due accuracy and due impartiality in news and that significant mistakes in news should normally be acknowledged and corrected quickly and appropriately.

As one of five interviewees before the premiere of Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Sequel", Lawson had claimed that we subsidise renewable energy but tax fossil fuels, and that "all of the experts" say that there has not been an increase in extreme weather events; that over the last 10 years, the average world temperature had slightly declined. The complainants maintained that these statements had not been properly challenged. The BBC accepted that it had not met the standards set out in its Editorial Guidelines; it has since taken a number of actions in response, for example, publishing a report on the BBC News website highlighting criticisms of the interview and identifying inaccuracies in some of the content, and examining some of the more contentious claims in the Today programme on the following day. The programme makers had sought to achieve due impartiality by giving appropriate weight to other perspectives.

The BBC had had to consider an earlier complaint about an interview with Lord Lawson on the Today programme in 2014; at that time, the complainant claimed that as Lord Lawson had been in discussion with an eminent climate scientist, this had given listeners the impression of parity between their views. The BBC then accepted that it should have made it sufficiently clear that Lord Lawson represented a minority view on the science of climate change so that listeners could judge his contribution accordingly.

On the recent complaints, Ofcom found that the first statements about the subsidisation and taxation of different fuels were correct on the position in the United Kingdom, though not globally, so there had been no breach of the due accuracy requirements. However, the statements maintaining that all the experts say that there has not been an increase in extreme climate events and that the

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average world temperature has slightly declined were incorrect and were not sufficiently challenged. Ofcom was particularly concerned, as this breach involved the same contributor discussing the same topic on the same programme as in 2014. Both broadcasts had lacked clarity about the minority position of Lord Lawson's views on the science of climate change. Thus, the programme was not duly accurate. However, there had been no breach of the requirement to acknowledge mistakes appropriately, as the BBC had made attempts to do so.

Ofcom; 'Today, BBC Radio 4, 10 August 2017, 06.00', Ofcom Broadcast and On Demand Bulletin, Issue 351, 9 April 2018, p. 32

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/112701/issue-351-broadcast-on-demand-bulletin.pdf

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