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Forum response – commentary

'Institutional neutrality in climate change science must be accompanied by individual viewpoint diversity'

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Abstract

Burgess's essay in defence of institutional neutrality addresses the very specific political culture that prevails in the United States. I agree with his defence, certainly for publicly funded institutions. But ensuring institutional neutrality is only part of how to regain public trust in climate change science. In this short commentary, I make an additional point: political neutrality at an institutional level must be backed by an institution's commitment to promoting and protecting individual viewpoint diversity. Indeed, an institution's neutrality can perhaps best be preserved by encouraging the widest range of individual viewpoint diversity among its members.

Keywords

Institutional neutrality, viewpoint diversity, legitimate disagreement, trust in science

In the early 2000s, I oversaw a publicly funded interdisciplinary research centre in the United Kingdom. The Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research brought together scientists, social scientists, economists and engineers across nine U.K. institutions, operating with the strap line 'integrated research for sustainable solutions' for climate change. During my time directing the Centre, I began to notice that differences in beliefs, values and political commitments held by Centre staff were frequently self-censored in order to maintain collective conformity to a particular narrative about climate change: a framing of the problem and of the range of 'acceptable' solutions that Dan Sarewitz later called 'the plan' (Sarewitz, 2011). I concluded that the reason for this reticence to disclose personal values was that researchers in the Centre believed that the need to double-down on climate change was so important that value-based disagreement among researchers should not be exposed, and certainly not communicated, to attentive public audiences. Although rarely voiced as such, the thought was that researchers needed to present a common front against the forces of climate denialism and right-wing opposition.

Matthew Burgess's essay in this journal, 'Towards institutional neutrality in climate change science', stems from his concern about the erosion of public trust in scientific institutions in the

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United States, and he puts forward arguments for what he calls 'institutional neutrality' as a means of restoring trust, or at least for arresting further erosion of trust. He suggests such neutrality needs to operate at three levels: in relation to institutions' policies, practices and norms. With regard to practices and norms, Burgess writes that 'institutions should prioritize discovery and scholarly excellence over activism, and viewpoint diversity and open inquiry should be robust enough for stakeholders of all stripes to have access to trusted scientific expertise' (Burgess, 2026: 1).

It was this comment about 'viewpoint diversity' within publicly funded scientific research institutions that reminded me of my Tyndall Centre experience. Yes, we had worked hard when designing the Centre to bring together different disciplinary perspectives on climate change. And as our work unfolded, we thought hard about how better to 'do' interdisciplinary research (see Barry, 2008, for a discussion of this). The 2000s decade was before 'diversity, equality and inclusion' (DEI) became institutionalised in British higher education. Nevertheless, we sought to secure as best we could gender diversity among the hundred or so staff working across the distributed Centre. We also sought to ensure that a relatively flat management hierarchy would allow junior PhDs and postdocs to interact and engage with senior professors. However, as with the operationalising of DEI in most higher education institutions in more recent years, we paid no attention to securing viewpoint diversity among the staff we recruited or hired. And by viewpoint diversity here I mean researchers holding different political values and social norms, a diversity captured, for example, by individuals being positioned differently on the spectrum of Jonathan Haidt's six 'moral foundations': Care/harm, Fairness/cheating, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, Sanctity/degradation, Liberty/oppression (Haidt, 2012).

Burgess's essay addresses the very specific political culture that prevails in the United States, and his argument and proposed solutions need translating into different political settings. I agree with his commitment to institutional neutrality, for publicly funded universities generally and more specifically for publicly funded climate science institutions (I don't think this argument holds, certainly not in the same way, for commercially or philanthropically funded research institutions and/or private think tanks). But ensuring institutional neutrality is only part of the struggle to regain public trust in climate change science. In this short commentary, I make an additional point: political neutrality at an institutional level must be backed by an institution's commitment to promoting and protecting individual viewpoint diversity. Defending institutional neutrality does not undermine scientists' individual identities or constrain their values-based activism. Beyond researchers' professional identities, they also possess identities as members of faith communities, cultural groups and political organisations. Indeed, as I reflected on my Tyndall Centre experience, an institution's neutrality can perhaps best be preserved by encouraging the widest range of individual viewpoint diversity.

Burgess points out that in the United States, most climate change scientists and researchers have left-leaning views and that this asymmetry has grown over the past 30 years. For example, his headline statistic is that the ratio of U.S. professors self-identifying as 'liberal or far-left' compared to those identifying as 'conservative or far-right' has risen from 2.7 in 1990 to 6.8 in 2022. This is more than a doubling in this measure of political asymmetry in the U.S. academy over the past three decades. A similar asymmetry exists among U.S. academics specifically in relation to climate change, as reported in Matt Nisbet's 'Climateshift' report (Nisbet, 2011). For Burgess, this lack of viewpoint diversity among U.S. professors is a primary cause of the public's declining trust in research institutions, and in climate change science in particular.

Burgess's essay focused exclusively on the U.S. context. Declines in public trust in science have not generally been as large elsewhere in the world (Pearson, 2026), although they have been noticeable in many countries. A recent survey by the Wellcome Trust (2026) showed that in the United Kingdom between 2020 and 2026, there has been almost a halving in the proportion of the British public who say they 'trust science a lot' – down over this period from 63% to 34%. Viewpoint diversity is also undoubtedly a problem in U.K. higher education

and research. For example, around 90% of U.K. academics voted in the 2016 national referendum to remain in the EU, compared to just 48% of the general population (THE, 2016).

There are many ways of identifying viewpoint diversity within a research institution beyond those highlighted by Burgess or the above example of Brexit voting behaviour in the United Kingdom. It was my concern about the (tacit) suppression of viewpoint diversity that prompted me in 2007 – after my term of office as Tyndall Centre director came to an end – to write my book 'Why We Disagree About Climate Change' (Hulme, 2009). My frustration was triggered not just by stunted discussions within the Centre about the full range of possible 'solutions' to climate change. More importantly, my frustration was generated by the nature of wider public debates about climate change. I wrote the book to articulate the many reasons why it was entirely rational – and hence reasonable – for people to disagree about various aspects of climate change without labelling the protagonists in such disagreements 'climate change deniers'.

Quite legitimate disagreements exist about numerous aspects of climate change without the holders of those views necessarily being sceptical about climate science; for example, the nature of the problem itself, the distribution of responsibility for causing it, the scale of the present and future risks, or the desirability of specific policies and interventions that could minimise those risks. This is why publicly funded climate change research institutions need to actively nurture and promote individual viewpoint diversity, whilst at the same time, as Burgess argues, maintaining the institution's overall political neutrality. To repeat his claim [emphasis added]: 'stakeholders of *all stripes* [should] have access to trusted scientific expertise'.

Writing recently in *Nature*, Mark Henderson – director of corporate affairs at the Wellcome Trust in London – makes a similar point. Although not writing specifically about climate science, he observes that 'public trust in science can't be sustained by the support of narrow constituencies at one end of an ideological spectrum'. (Henderson, 2026) The dangers of failing to attend to these concerns about viewpoint diversity are many. And they are particularly acute with regard to climate science and climate change research more generally. Institutions, whether science itself, universities as a collective, or specific research centres, that don't cultivate viewpoint diversity within their ranks risk becoming sclerotic. They are in danger of failing to interrogate their own premises for research investigations and their judgements become subject to group think.

I do not think that climate science, as a whole, suffers from such myopia, but there have been some high-profile examples of where scientists have succumbed to myopic thinking or have failed to recognise biases, whether conscious or not, towards seeking out or otherwise favouring worst-case climate or climate impact projections. The controversy known as Climategate in 2009 was an example of group think (Grundmann, 2012) and examples of bias include the retraction of the high-profile climate economics paper by Kotz et al. published by *Nature* in 2024 (Kotz et al., 2025; see also Retraction Watch, 2025), and the failure to call-out widespread misuses of the extreme RCP8.5 climate scenario (Pielke et al., 2022). In each of these three cases, it was actors external to mainstream climate science who did the whistleblowing.

In a recent *Nature* article about trust in elite institutions being on the wane globally, Chris Tyler and colleagues have drawn attention to why scientists in their institutional settings and collaborations need to take an open and accountable stance in relation to their public communications. These authors are very clear about scientists' responsibilities: 'Scientists should be open about their methods, data and uncertainties, including when advising informally. And they should acknowledge the values that shape their recommendations – a rare occurrence in current science advice. This might mean stating that they prioritize precautionary approaches to safety over reducing regulation; or value individual liberty over collective-risk reduction'. (Tyler et al., 2026: 36) Being open and clear about one's values and premises is good advice when communicating research outcomes. But political neutrality at an institutional level can only be fully achieved if individual viewpoint diversity among that institution's members is actively sought

and assiduously protected through the institution's cultural norms and practices.

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