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The Spectator's new editor has lost it before he even had it.

By George Monbiot. Published on the Guardian website, 23rd September 2009

I've spent the past few days taking a deep breath. The Spectator magazine's response(1) to my column on climate-change deniers last week was so angry, abusive and downright bonkers that it has taken me this long to decide to answer it. But here we go.

I won't bother trying to answer Rod Liddle, whose post was penned in nothing but bile and saliva(2). Let's consider instead the claims made by the Spectator's new editor, Fraser Nelson(3). Among other accusations, he maintains that I spiked the debate the magazine was hoping to organise between myself and Ian Plimer. This is the opposite of the truth. It was the Spectator that spiked the debate.

In the paranoid style favoured by climate-change deniers, Fraser maintains that I published my correspondence with the Spectator in order to "expose" his predecessor, Matthew d'Ancona. In fact I published it to show how this story developed. In view of Fraser's misrepresentation of what happened, I'm glad I did. As the emails show, both Plimer and the Spectator accepted my conditions for the debate: in the Spectator's case as soon as I proposed them(4,5). It seemed straightforward: I accepted Plimer's challenge; he accepted mine. The two debates – one in writing, one in person – would complement each other: having seen his answers to my specific questions(6), people at the face-to-face debate could better assess Plimer's generalisations.

But after accepting my challenge, Plimer used a series of preposterous evasions and excuses to try to wriggle out of it(7). After putting up with this squirming for almost a month, I gave him a ten-day deadline(8), telling him that if he didn't honour our agreement by then I would assume that he had forfeited the debates. The Spectator was aware of the deadline, as I copied its staff in on all our correspondence. But four days before it expired, the Spectator announced that it had cancelled the public debate, and would be staging an event for Ian Plimer alone. If you doubt this, please read the emails. The deadline passed and still Plimer did not answer my questions.

So I feel like the friend who had his head bashed repeatedly into the bonnet of a police van by an officer, who then charged him with criminal damage to the van.

Luckily for my sanity, which, as I'm sure the Spectator will agree, hangs by a thread at the best of times, I'm not the only one who sees it this way. Following the comment thread beneath Fraser's post, I had the disconcerting experience of seeing Spectator readers – who reject climate science and don't think much of me either – leaping to my defence(9). Having read the correspondence, they could see that Fraser was talking out of his backside.

Tim Lambert(10), Mike Kaulbars(11) and the New Statesman's Medhi Hasan(12) have also spoken out.

Along the way, Fraser endorsed the "list of 700 scientists who dissent over man-made global warming" compiled by the office of Senator James Inhofe, which has already been exposed as yet another exercise in distortion by Inhofe's staff(13). It wouldn't have taken Fraser five minutes to discover this, but as he has shown in his support for Ian Plimer, he seems prepared to accept any claim that confirms his beliefs.

Just as significant as what Fraser Nelson wrote is what he didn't. At no point, as far as I can see, has he pressed Ian Plimer to honour our agreement and ensure that the debate could go ahead by answering my questions. Fraser attacks me for publishing my evidence, but says nothing about Plimer's failure to publish his. In organising this debate, the Spectator was supposed to be neutral. But the referee has taken sides throughout the game. Quite why this magazine continues to champion Ian Plimer, who can't answer the basic questions I sent him and whose book contains page after page of hilarious schoolboy howlers(14), remains a mystery.

So in one short post Fraser comes across as partisan, gullible, paranoid, possessed of woeful judgment and incapable of telling a straight story. Not a great start for a new editor.

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