



# THE HINDU

‘Climate change is the most important story of our lives’



Alan Rusbridger, Editor-in-Chief of Guardian. File photo

*Alan Rusbridger, editor-in-chief of The Guardian, on the massive response to the newspaper’s fossil fuel disinvestment campaign and the urgent need to take action on climate change.*

*The idea for ‘Keep it in the Ground’ -the campaign on disinvestment in fossil fuel-based energy companies launched by The Guardian early this year — was seeded by Editor-in-Chief **Alan Rusbridger**, who will soon step*

*down from his 20-year leadership of the highly respected media group. In order to save the planet from catastrophic climate change, global temperatures have to stay within a 2°C threshold. This can be achieved if the 200 top fossil fuel companies wind up operations or shift to alternate renewable fuels. The campaign is therefore urging organisations to divest from such companies, and has started by petitioning two of the biggest philanthropic organisations — the Wellcome Trust and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation — to do so. The other arm of the campaign is to change readers' mindsets on the imminent threat of climate change, by telling the story more effectively and through different media. Mr. Rusbridger spoke to **Parvathi Menon** in London about the campaign.*

### **Why the campaign, and why now?**

I have had a feeling for a long time that this is an important story, if not the most important story of our lives. Climate change does pose an existential threat to the species, and we haven't got long to do something about it. If we go beyond 2° C [in global temperatures] then the consequences are really problematic for millions of people. So if that is right, then it is such an enormous story that you would expect it to be on the front page every day — and it almost never is.

I was thinking about what would I regret not having done as editor and I wished we had done more on this story to wake people up. I came back from Christmas and pulled together a group of staff. Not just the environmental writers, but economic, political and culture writers, graphic design and video people — a big group of about 45 — and asked them what they thought, and there was tremendous enthusiasm to do something. We decided to start with people we admired — the two trusts, because they are in science and health and believe that climate change is a mortal threat. And because they are progressive and intelligent, we thought they might be up to listening to the argument.

Well, that was how the campaign started, and we decided we would do reporting as well, because we are not just a campaign organisation. We will do it in multiple media, we will get poets and artists as well as data people, and investigative reporters — we will throw everything at it. And we would try and suggest ways by which the readers could join in by helping, signing petitions, lobbying, writing and putting pressure on their own places of

work.

**Is it having the impact you'd hoped for? What is the response and where is it coming from?**

It is having a huge response. I think in the first month it was the most tweeted issue anywhere in Britain. A hundred-and-eighty thousand people have signed the petition. Six thousand people wrote back and told us they would like to help. We asked them to write a letter to Wellcome Board members, and hundreds of people did that. The letters have come from all over the world — China, India, America, South America and other European countries.

Also, the people taking part in the talks coming up in Paris [United Nations Climate Change Summit to be held this December] have been in touch saying this is immensely helpful, because it will raise the profile of the subject. They are worried that they would go to the talks with nobody writing or talking about the subject, and so pressure would not be there on the politicians. So I am really happy about the way it is going.

**What about the two trusts, as well as the fossil fuel companies that you have identified for divestment?**

Well, they have all engaged, and I am going to be meeting the chief executive of Shell soon to talk to him. Wellcome's position at the moment is that they share the same anxieties about climate change but that it is better if they have the money in these companies so that they can engage with the issue. We have asked them to show us how that [investment] is producing any benefit because lots of people are sceptical about it. The Gates' Foundation is broadly saying that they need to maximise their revenues. But more and more of our reporting shows that the bulk of the oil companies — and the fossil fuel companies generally — are underperforming. And so you are not losing out by divesting.

**The argument in the developing world would be that the disinvestment you are talking about, and a swift shift to non-conventional sources, could be devastating in its impact, as it might actually commit a vast section of the population to very low levels of energy quality and access.**

**As of now solar energy is very expensive, and people want that subsidies be retained on fossil fuels for domestic consumption and agriculture. Do you think your campaign should factor in these issues?**

I think there are always arguments for not doing it, and there are always arguments about timing, but the status quo at the moment is not delivering anything, and I suppose the fear of the rest of the world about India is that it is going to burn vast amounts of dirty coal in very inefficient ways, and that could be really devastating. So if the rest of the world can persuade India not to do that, then we have to look at the issue of the subsidies by which fossil fuels are supported. You say solar is expensive. But as I understand, the price of solar — for example in China — is dropping. So if it is a price thing then we have to look at the cost of making renewables — especially solar, which you have a lot of in India. There is also the fact that once solar is installed the ongoing cost is zero.

**International climate change negotiations are pegged on the issue of a fair distribution of the burden of reducing carbon emissions. Developing nations argue that the developed countries must take a greater share of that burden, because they are the primary contributors to the problem. Does your campaign have a position on this?**

No. We think that is very important, but it is not going to get readers reading about it. You are not going to get a thousand readers signing, you know. This is just not going to do it. Somebody said that we should have a position on nuclear power. The trouble is — the broader you get, you just go back to doing environmental coverage. I have made the campaign very narrow and focussed.

It is about this: we have to stay within two degrees. If we burn all the coal in India, for example, we are going to bust the 2 degrees as 80 per cent of it is unburnable. Therefore, it is overvalued; therefore, we shouldn't be in it. It is really a very simple argument. After that you can start arguing about what you have instead [of fossil fuels].

**What does your campaign say on nuclear energy? Do you see this source of energy as ‘non-conventional’?**

Well, I would just say that we do not want to get drawn into that because if we come out with a position on nuclear power, or whatever else it is, people will change the debate and say you must prove this and you must prove that. These are all good debates we have had in the past, and we can have them in the future. The beauty of what we are trying to do is to keep it incredibly narrow — and it is working.

**So non-fossil fuels are primarily solar and wind.**

If you go back through the *Guardian's* coverage, and we have had five environmental correspondents, who have written thousands and thousands of words on this — nobody can say the *Guardian* hasn't covered this. But at the moment we are doing something different, which is to try and focus attention on this one narrow point. The interesting thing to me is that the response has not just come from *Guardian* readers, who feel passionately about this. You know I have spoken to several bankers and fund managers and people involved in investment — some have been thinking about it and some have not — who keep coming back and saying that [the campaign] is causing ripples through the city. If it is doing that and if it feeds into politicians' debates, then maybe it will start changing things.

What you are describing is the status quo: if we don't burn this coal, developing countries will suffer; if solar remains expensive, that is not a feasible alternative. That is the thing we have to change. And I think, as a newspaper what we can do is to try and find mechanisms to change people's minds.

**How flexible is your campaign framework? If you say that fossil fuel companies are by-and-large to blame for global warming and climate change isn't there logic to extend disinvestment in, say, transport companies that are a major source of carbon emissions — Volkswagen, or General Motors, for example?**

That would be another good campaign. The reason I like our campaign is that it is very easy to understand and if you succeed in getting the idea out — and that is what we are doing — it changes the way that people see the finances of the whole thing. Of course, you are looking at consumers as well as producers, and that would be another campaign, and maybe *The Hindu* could do that [laughs]. Seriously, I think it is the responsibility of journalists to start thinking of things to change behaviour.

**Will you continue to be involved with this post-retirement?**

Well, I find the last two months have been really interesting. The issues are intellectually fascinating, and I don't want to just drop out. I hope it is making other journalists think on ways of writing the biggest story in the world. One or two journalists have carped saying this isn't a good campaign. That is fine. But what have you done? When your grandchildren ask you what did you do for an issue that is so important for the future of mankind and if the answer is "Well, I have done xyz" that is fine. But I suspect most of them won't. It is much easier to sit on the sidelines and pick holes in it. Anyone could do that. But what have you actually done that is going to make a difference? If journalists can't answer that question, or are not thinking imaginatively about ways of engaging young people, then what is their responsibility in this?

Keywords: [Alan Rusbridger](#), [climate change](#), [global warming](#), [Guardian](#)

[Published by The Hindu on 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2015](#)