

NFR:

WELCOME

We must always be open to the real facts

GUIDED BY SCIENCE

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THE OXFORD Dictionary word of the year for 2016 was “post truth politics”. Not strictly a word but, in the same vein, this year a likely candidate will be “alternative facts” — uttered by a spokeswoman to explain why the White House considered the Trump inauguration crowd to be bigger than Obama’s despite the photographic evidence.

While this sort of behaviour might leave many of us scratching our head, those in the science world have seen such tactics used for years. Repeat a scientific untruth enough times and it becomes the “truth” — in the public or media mind at least. The debates around fluoride, 1080, immunisation, water, climate change, genetic modification and even evolution have suffered from “alternative facts”.

We had seen science start to get the upper hand in many of



Politics is a battle of ideas; in the course of a healthy debate we'll prioritise different goals, and the different means of reaching them.

different goals, and the different means of reaching them. But without some common baseline of facts; without a willingness to admit new information, and concede that your opponent is making a fair point, and that science and reason matter, we'll keep talking past each other, making common ground and compromise impossible.

In the current climate of “alternative facts” we need to be even more vigilant that science and evidence is not distorted. It is now more important that we invest in