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10 July 2003

Dear James Nixey  
BTC Workshop and Chatham House Charter

Thank you for inviting us to attend the planned workshop on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project being organised by Chatham House on 18th July.

We have looked at the proposed programme and are writing to express our grave concerns about both the format of the workshop and its accompanying invitation, which appear to be at odds with the Institute's Royal Charter and byelaws – at least in spirit – and to threaten the Institute's reputation for impartiality and balance.

The Institute aspires to facilitate debate on controversial issues through organising impartial forums in which all sides are treated equally. That aspiration, and the Institute's reputation, has a long history. Indeed, the second preambular paragraph to the Institute's 1926 Royal Charter makes clear that an important ground on which the Institute sought, and was granted, a Royal Charter was that the "Institute has since its establishment ... regularly held meetings at which questions of international importance have been impartially explained and discussed...."

We believe that the format of the planned workshop falls far short of that standard. If the forum for debate is to be impartial, it is crucial that all sides are given an equal opportunity to present their views. Yet, in this instance, the panels consist solely of representatives of a single commercial group, the BTC Consortium, that is currently seeking to obtain financial support for its project from financial institutions in the UK and elsewhere. Although critics of the project have been invited to attend the workshop - and may or may not have the opportunity to speak from the floor - this in no way satisfies the requirement for impartial explanation, not least because of the authority that derives from speaking from the platform.

Impartial explanation requires that the audience is fully and properly informed of both sides of the debate, which in turn requires that both sides have equal time to set out their views and to do so on an equal footing. This is especially the case where the subject matter is as contentious, and the views as polarised, as in the case of the Baku pipeline; something that I am sure you are aware of.

Separately, we are concerned that the invitation letter, which comes from the Institute and constitutes a Chatham House publication, repeats as fact certain assertions (for example on the extent of consultation and on the cost of the project) that are contested by critics of the project and which reflect only the views of the BTC pipeline sponsor. At no point does the Invitation suggest that contrary views may obtain. It is certainly arguable that such presentation of highly contentious assertions as fact could constitute a violation of the Royal Charter's prohibition on the Institute expressing an opinion on such matters (Article 5). We would argue in this case that it is implicit from the invitation that it is the Opinion of the Institute that the disputed assertions of the BTC Consortium are correct.

We therefore respectfully request that you take immediate action to ensure that the structure of the planned workshop is amended so as to allow for impartial explanation in accordance with the terms of your Royal Charter. Recognising the short time available until the meeting I should be grateful for your response by close of business tomorrow, Friday 11th July.

Yours sincerely,

Liana Stupples, Policy and Campaigns Director, Friends of the Earth  
Nicholas Hildyard, The Corner House  
Kerim Yildiz, Executive Director, Kurdish Human Rights Project

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