

Interview by Huw Spanner

The Bright Side

The self-styled 'sceptical environmentalist' Professor **Bjørn Lomborg** has for years been both extolled and excoriated. As he urges us all to 'cool it', *Third Way* got smart with him at the Copenhagen Consensus Center.



The accolades you have received – three years ago, for example, the *Guardian* called you 'one of the 50 people who could save the planet' – are extraordinary. Would the people who knew you as a child have been surprised?

I don't know. I think they would probably say they always knew I was a little bit weird, but they didn't know whether it was weird in a good way. I excelled academically, and certainly I knew too many long words.

What kind of upbringing did you have?

I was brought up by my mom, who's a primary-school teacher – my dad died when I was very young. I'm an only child and I had a *huge* amount of love. I've always felt that the reason I've been able to do what I've done is fundamentally because my mom told me, 'You're just amazing and I love you.' So, you know, I don't feel quite the same need to know that everybody else does.

Was there any religion in your background?

The stepdad who was the primary guy who brought me up was a liberal Catholic priest, in the Rudolph Steiner theology – a slightly odd offshoot of Christianity that mixed in a little bit of Hinduism: the idea of rebirth and karma, that kind of thing. I think it's plausible, but I've always felt that what really matters is not so much, you know, what is supposed to happen after you die as whether you're a good person here in this world.

Has that been a major driver in your life, the desire to be a good person?

I think it's crucial to accept that you have needs your-

self – you want to have a good life and to do things that excite you – but at the same time these should at least have some social value. So, I think the honest answer is that doing some good has been a partial driver.

The reason I ask is that you have spent much of the last decade asking how we can do most good for humankind on a limited budget. For one man that might be just an academic exercise, but for another it could be a matter of passionate concern.

I really think it has to be both. For me, compassion is about stopping and thinking, 'What is the smart thing to do?' – and then doing it.

One of the points that I've tried to make, especially in the [debate about climate change] but also in a lot of different discussions, is that there's a lot of *feeling* good in many of these arguments – 'I've put up some solar panels, so I feel I have done some good.' But what really matters is that you actually *do* some good, which is – sometimes at least – not the same thing.

What is your take on human nature? I get the impression that you're quite an optimist.

I *love* these questions, because these are not really things that I think about very much – so forgive me if my answers are a little bit extempore.

I think human nature is not inherently good or evil. I think we have a strong tendency to look out for ourselves, but we have an amazing ability also to care for others. The trick is to set up social structures that make sure that people get the comfort and security that they

need but also make it possible for us to not harm others and to show compassion.

And what is your take on the non-human world? I don't know much about Steiner's theology, but there is a strain in Catholicism that teaches that the world exists merely for our use and has no intrinsic value, but then there is the line taken by Francis of Assisi, who talked of the ox and the cow as our brother and sister.

Well, I would definitely tend to think more like Francis of Assisi. I'm a vegetarian because I don't want to kill animals. Obviously, a cow is not the equal of a person, but there is definitely a moral obligation to keep animals alive as well. I think they have a right more than just to exist for our pleasure.

We're often reminded that you used to be a supporter of Greenpeace. What did that support consist of, and what did it mean to you?

My support for Greenpeace was merely that I [gave them money], I wore their badge, I had their poster up in my room – you know, the one with the quote from the [Native American] chief (which, by the way, I later realised was fake): 'When the last tree is cut, the last river poisoned, and the last fish dead, we will discover that we can't eat money...!' For me, it was more of a statement, a way of saying: We're not treating our world well. We need to do more for nature.

I felt strongly about it – you know, when the topic came up. But still it was on a fairly low level – I wasn't out in a rubber dinghy. And it didn't have to be Green-

peace; I could equally well have been a member of the Nature Conservancy or something else.

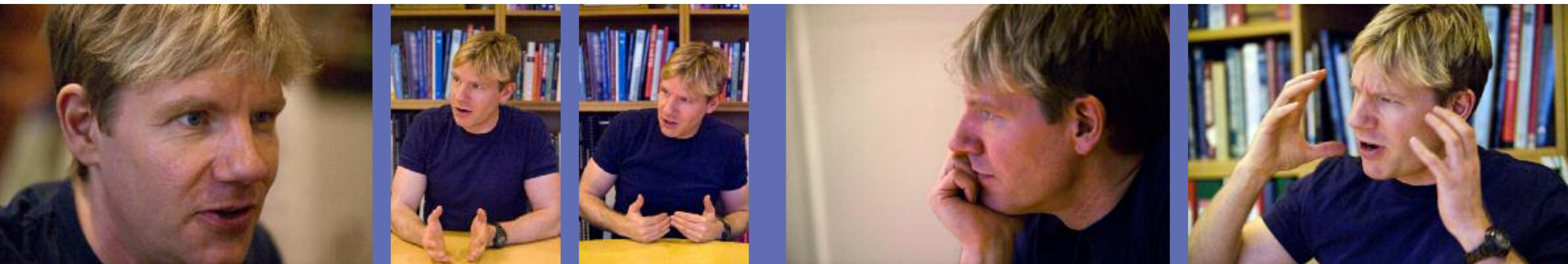
How did you become disillusioned with Greenpeace?

Well, I read an article in *Wired* by [the US 'free-market environmentalist'] Julian Simon saying: 'Contrary to what you believe, things are getting better.' My immediate reaction was: 'Right-wing propaganda! It can't be true.' I thought it would be fun to get my students to show that he was wrong, but as we went through it, we realised that a lot of the things he said were right – and when you think about it, it's kind of obvious. Air quality is getting better, not worse. Water quality is getting better. People are better fed, they live longer, they are not as poor or as sick as they used to be.

And yet we have this whole culture – and it's much, much more than just Greenpeace – that we're going in the wrong direction, that things are falling apart. Everyone – politicians, journalists and certainly scientists – are telling us that things are getting worse and worse. But that is actually not the case with many – not all, but many – of those important indicators.

You know, some of my friends have been debating with themselves for years: Is it right to bring kids into

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Photographs Andrew Firth

this world? Now, if the world is coming to an end, kind of thing, certainly it's a very relevant thing to take into consideration; but imagine choosing to forgo one of the most wonderful things that life offers, just because you were misinformed!

Just to be clear, you are still green?

Absolutely. Obviously, I still recycle. I don't own a car.

What I've rejected is the idea that this is the end of the world and that we must atone – you know, 'Thou shalt not do' all these things. No. What we should do is collectively make sure that we can get all the good things but without the bad things.

And your attitude to nature is one of prudence, maybe, but not reverence.

You know, I like the idea of the environment in general – I think most people do. I like the idea of having lots of whales, I like the idea of having untouched rainforests; but I also recognise that basically we have gotten rich by cutting down virtually all of our forests. Do we want to deny the people of Brazil the same opportunities? I think we could *pay* them for not cutting down the rainforest; but I also think we need to recognise that their needs are probably more important than the need for an extra hectare of forest when we have lots of it.

You place a heavy emphasis on cost-benefit analysis. From a moral point of view, it's important to say that it has limitations, hasn't it? What value could you put on the last pair of blue whales in existence, for example?

As you say, it's clear that the world is not just an Excel sheet and you cannot just say: Here are the costs, here are the benefits and that's it: in a sense we've made the decision already. But likewise we cannot ignore the fact that there *are* costs and benefits, and I see this analysis as a very important part of understanding our choices.

I'm pretty sure that if a whale was threatened with extinction, we'd find a way to stop that happening and we'd be willing to pay for it; but we're not willing to pay for an extra beetle that we didn't even know existed. So, in a sense you could say we are already implicitly making these sorts of cost-benefit analyses. Fortunately, most of our choices are not about exotic, extravagant things like the whale. They're much more: What would you do to save this fairly anonymous beetle?

Am I right that you take it as read that climate change is happening and that it is predominantly man-made?

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

In my 2010 edition of *Cool It*,² you seem to argue that the threat is hugely exaggerated and you say: 'It's obvious that there are many other and more pressing issues.'

However, in *Smart Solutions to Climate Change*,³ which also came out last year, you say it's 'a challenge that humanity must confront ... We actually have only one option: we all need to start seriously focusing, right now, on the most effective ways to fix global warming.'

It sounds like two different people speaking – and a lot of reviewers of *Smart Solutions* have said that you seem to have changed your tune.

OK, OK. My sense of what I say in *Cool It* – and I make these boldface points very up-front in the book – remember this was 2007 [originally] – is: Global warming is real, though it's not the end of the world (as it's often portrayed), but the current solutions aren't working. We should impose a \$2 carbon tax (now \$7, because the facts have changed) and we should invest the revenue in research and development. And that's just what we say in *Smart Solutions*. I really don't see the difference.

But it's important for me to say: we *should* be doing this, and *should* be doing it right now. It's tragic that for 20 years we have been following a strategy that we kind of knew was not going to work. Kyoto-style solutions are very costly and will do very little good – which is the argument I've been pounding for the past 11 or 12 years.

What exactly is wrong with Kyoto?

Our problem, very simply, is: we burn fossil fuels that emit CO₂, which causes global warming. Well, why don't we stop using fossil fuels? That seems to be the obvious answer, and that's what pretty much everybody has jumped on. What we forget is, we don't burn fossil fuels to annoy Al Gore, we burn them because they power pretty much everything we like about civilisation. Which is why half the world's population that is poor want to use much, much more of them. And so unless we can find another source of power that provides all the same benefits but doesn't emit CO₂, we're never going to solve this.

We're never going to be able to ask people: 'Can you please do without all that fun stuff?' And that's why we

need to take a step back and see that it's not about cutting a little bit of CO₂ now, to make ourselves *feel* good; it's about cutting a lot in the long run that *does* good – and that means technology.

One of the other areas where technology solved the problem is food. In the 1970s, Paul Ehrlich⁴ and others were basically saying: We're not going to be able to feed the world. Their solution was sort of: Well, let a lot of them starve and maybe the rest of us should stop eating so much, or maybe go vegetarian.

I remember the slogan: 'Live simply so that others may simply live.'

Yeah, yeah. And that was never going to work. The guy who solved the problem was [Norman Borlaug, 'the father of the Green Revolution'], who found a smart way to make rice and wheat much smaller so that there would be much more. So, it's about better technology.

Did you argue for investment in R&D 11 or 12 years ago?

No, because I didn't know it was actually a good idea. That's part of the reason why I worked with some of the biggest and best environmental economists to find other ways to tackle global warming. We were clearly coming to the conclusion that the current solutions weren't working, and so that was what I was saying first.

You know, I was simply saying: There are lots of solutions [to problems such as malaria and HIV] that do work. Let's spend money here! There are *clearly* solutions that don't work – the Kyoto-style solutions – let's not spend money here!

Your books have made a big thing of presenting us with choices: should we spend money on preventing climate change or on fighting malaria? (You say that for a mere \$3 billion a year we could reduce its incidence by half.)

Many people say these are false choices. After all, you

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helped to persuade countries such as the United States to reject Kyoto, but did they then spend their money on fighting malaria instead? No. And isn't the reason that the rich world has not dealt with it not that we have squandered our resources on Kyoto but that we don't care? Climate change affects us directly; malaria doesn't.

Sure. But actually, if you look at [George W] Bush's legacy, he was very focused on malaria. Some people from the National Security Council told me that one of the main reasons why he gave another \$1.3 billion to malaria was because of the outcome of the first Copenhagen Consensus. But I'm not going to take credit for that.

I do believe, though, that lots of people actually do want to help people [in the developing world], but there is a tendency to focus on a few things that make the headlines, that sound scary and exciting – and that does suck some of the oxygen out of the conversation.

A lot of people see you as being naive – which is strange, perhaps, in a political scientist – because, rather than persuading the world to look for another way to tackle climate change, your denunciation of Kyoto in effect encouraged much of the world to do nothing at all.

Well, but listen, back in 2001 there was no other solution on the table. I would have loved to have been able to say, 'In the future, we'll have a better solution'...

But the bandwagon that started rolling, that global warming is 'the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people,'⁵ if you didn't actually give it a push, you at least gave it room to gain some momentum.

Well, I mean, I would find that a very strange argument. I would say that if anything it was the *amazing* exaggeration – however well-intentioned – that we've seen from Al Gore and many others, who have said that this is the end of the world and we've got to throw everything and the kitchen sink at it – these are the people who have made it possible for the [James] Inhofes of this world to go to the other extreme. The path that I've been trying to tread is, if you will, the middle road.

If we had started much sooner saying, 'Right, Kyoto doesn't work. Let's start thinking about other, smarter ways!'... But 10 years ago when I said this, it was anathema and people were outraged that I would *dare* utter this – apostasy, is that the word? It had these religious overtones. And now everybody is basically saying, 'Oh



yeah, Kyoto is a dead end and it was never really going to work, and we need to find a smarter way?

Nonetheless, the official policy is to keep on down the same road – there is huge inertia. The reaction to the breakdown in Copenhagen [in 2009] was not ‘We need to find a different approach,’ it was simply ‘Let’s wait a year and say the same things again in Cancún!’ And that is what they’ll do next year in Durban and then next year in Rio. You know, it’s almost mind-boggling.

OK, so you feel that we have wasted time –
Oh, absolutely!

– but you don’t feel in any way responsible for that?

No, no, no. I think that’s a crucial point. It is true we’ve wasted a lot of time, but it’s because everybody in power – except perhaps for Bush and his administration – has been saying: ‘There’s only one solution, and it’s Kyoto-style. And Kyoto was dead before it was even born.’

As you yourself point out, there are many measures that could help to prevent climate change that are both simple and almost cost-free – for example, planting trees, painting rooftops white, reducing speed limits... Why aren’t we forging ahead with these things?

Well, I think to a very large extent this is exactly what we saw with Kyoto: there is one right solution – namely, cutting carbon emissions. And a large part of the impetus for that is a very, very different thing from actually solving global warming: it’s about, you know, ‘Cars are bad’ or something. What this is really about, I think, is that, no, we don’t want industry, we don’t want all this – You know, we want a smaller, cosier society in which we all care for each other and have more time.

I suppose that attitude may prevail at the deep green end of things...

Yes, and if you deviate from that deep green argument, you risk a lot of fallout – and that’s not very nice. In some ways my career has been a good example of that.

Do you really think that the political establishment is dominated by deep green thinking?

Well, listen, if you were Tony Blair would you want to get everybody’s accolades by saying, ‘We’re going to cut emissions’ or would you say, ‘We’re going to paint the

roofs white and plant more trees’ and get all the greens on your neck saying you’re butting out?

I don’t know if you remember cold fusion – back in ’89 for a couple of months we actually thought it might be possible. The *Los Angeles Times* asked a lot of environmentalists what they thought of this and they were all *furios* about it, because it would mean, you know, we’d get all *wasteful*! But wait a minute! If this is clean, cheap energy, how can they be against it? But they were – which sort of suggests that there is a whole different layer of things below this that people are really against. Because if this was about solving the problem of global warming, we’d be asking: What solves it the cheapest?

And so adaptation [to climate change] was totally off the table in the Nineties, because people felt: If you talk about adaptation, people won’t care about cutting carbon emissions. And there is some truth to that. But, you know, if you don’t want to have all the solutions on the table, you’re essentially saying that you care more about the particular solution than actually solving the problem. And the same thing is happening now with geo-engineering.

The debate over man-made climate change is extremely heated, and the title *Cool It* can be read as a rebuke to both sides. You yourself have been likened to Hitler. How would you characterise the two sides of the debate? Do you see people as being ideologically driven? Is everyone honest, disinterested, serious, well-meaning?

I tend to think of most of the participants in this conversation as well-meaning and honest. Even the people who say that a lot of the science is very dodgy, it seems to me, spend a lot of time trying to find out whether that is true or not. So, I think they are well-intentioned – and I don’t doubt that Al Gore is.

Also, I just find that there is no point disputing people’s motivation: it just blocks any kind of conversation from the get-go. And of course what you have to remember is, it’s not about convincing Al Gore or Inhofe, it’s about convincing the people who believe those people; and so it really is about engaging everybody.

It’s clear from the analysis in your books that we can be easily hoodwinked by people who sound authoritative. What can lay people do to avoid being manipulated?

Well, I mean, you shouldn’t trust Al Gore, who’s a jour-

nalist, and you shouldn’t trust Bjørn Lomborg, who’s a political scientist, either. For the science, you should look at what the IPCC tells you. But remember, they basically cut out cost-benefit from their purview in 1998 – you could say (and I’ve no idea whether that’s true) because it didn’t come up with the right answer.

And also, you know, use some of your pragmatic ‘street smarts’. When half the world’s population don’t have food, don’t have education, don’t have access to clean drinking water and sanitation, and a quarter of everybody who dies dies from easily curable infectious diseases, it’s quite obvious to me – and to most people on this planet – that there are other, more immediate issues that we need to fix. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t fix global warming also, but it does mean that it cannot be our only priority and be sort of *exaggerated*...

The US biologist E O Wilson, reviewing *The Skeptical Environmentalist*⁶ in 2001, described your ‘sallies’ as ‘characterized by wilful ignorance, selective quotations, disregard for communication with genuine experts, and destructive campaigning to attract the attention of the media rather than scientists’. How do you react to that kind of comment? I could quote many more like that.

Well, it’s hard to react in one sentence, but you’re right, there are lots of those quotes out there.

I’ve never debated with him – not for lack of trying but he’s said that he doesn’t want to, you know, waste any energy on what I’ve been doing. But the people I have met who have made similar comments I think feel that we need to have some sort of Kyoto-style approach and since I say that’s bad, I must be wrong in every other way. When they realise that what I’m trying to point out is that it’s not helpful to say that sea-levels are going to rise 20 feet [by 2100] – because it’s not true and also because it panics us and makes us make bad decisions – and yes, global warming is real but Kyoto is just not going to work, so let’s try a different approach, I think people start to think: Oh, maybe he has *some* sort of point. I don’t think that most people will come over to my point of view, but I think most people will realise that I’m actually well-intentioned, I have good data – it doesn’t mean it’s the only data – and I have valid arguments that are actually worth a hearing.

I think the best example of that is Rajendra Pachauri,⁷ who was the one who compared me to Hitler – in 2010 he wrote a great blurb for my book. His conversion really happened when he met me a year and a half ago in Lindau, where there was a climate-change debate among four Nobels and me. We were sitting next to each other and he was sort of, ‘I find myself agreeing with Lomborg, but...’ There was constantly a ‘but’, but he was very surprised that I was a much nicer and much smarter and much more well-informed person than he expected. And also, I’m sure, he couldn’t really believe that a vegetarian could be a bad person!

But the point is, when people start realising that the arguments I’m making are not wholly bunk but are genuinely meant and fairly well substantiated, I think a lot of people gain a lot more respect for me. □

1 Supposedly a quotation from a speech made in 1854 by Chief Si’ahl (Seattle), written up ‘from notes’ by someone who heard it and published in 1887

2 *Cool It: The skeptical environmentalist’s guide to global warming* (CUP, 2007)

3 *Smart Solutions to Climate Change: Comparing costs and benefits*, edited by Bjørn Lomborg (CUP, 2010)

4 The US ecologist and author of *The Population Bomb* (1968)

5 US Senator James Inhofe in July 2003

6 *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the real state of the world* (CUP, 2001)

7 The chair of the IPCC since 2002, who in 2004 asked, ‘What is the difference between Lomborg’s view of humanity and Hitler’s?’ ... Lomborg thinks of people like numbers.

A longer version of this interview is posted on our website. Go to www.thirdwaymagazine.com to hear Bjørn Lomborg on realistic economics and the dangers of hyperbole.

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BIOGRAPHY

Bjørn Lomborg was born in 1965 and was educated at Aalborghus Gymnasium. After a year at the University of Georgia in the United States, he read political science at Aarhus University, gaining his doctorate at Copenhagen University in 1994.

He then lectured in statistics in the political science department at Aarhus until 2005 – from 1997 as an associate professor.

His first book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the real state of the world*, originally came out in Danish in 1998, and was published in English by CUP in 2001.

From 2002 to 2004, he was director of Denmark’s national Environmental Assessment Institute. There he first organised the ‘Copenhagen Consensus’, which brought together eight leading economists (including four Nobel laureates) in 2004 ‘to prioritise the best solutions to the world’s biggest challenges’. He repeated the exercise in 2006, but with UN ambassadors (including from China, India and the US). He edited the resultant book, *Global Crises, Global Solutions* (2004), which was abridged and updated two years later as *How to Spend \$50 Billion to Make the World a Better Place*.

Since 2005, he has been an adjunct professor at the Copenhagen Business School, and since 2006 director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center.

His second book, *Cool It*, was published in 2007 and has already been translated into 17 languages. The film of the book was released last year. He also edited *Smart Solutions to Climate Change* (2010).

He has taken part in many public debates, including on BBC2 and CNN, and has written for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, the *Boston Globe*, the *LA Times*, the *Economist*, the *Guardian*, the *Times*, the *Australian* and the *Globe and Mail*.

He was identified as a ‘global leader for tomorrow’ in 2001 at the World Economic Forum, and in 2002 as one of Europe’s nine ‘agenda-setters’ by *Business Week*. In 2004, *Time* named him one of the world’s 100 most influential people. Readers of *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* placed him 14th among the world’s ‘top 100 public intellectuals’ in 2005, and 41st in 2008 (when *Esquire* pronounced him ‘one of the 75 most influential people of the 21st century’).

This interview was conducted on January 11, 2011.