

# The 75 Most Influential People of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

WE SET OUT TO FIND THEM ACROSS EVERY FIELD OF ENDEAVOR, THE PEOPLE WHO ARE BENDING HISTORY RIGHT NOW. IT WAS AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK, WEIGHING THE RELATIVE INFLUENCE OF ENTERTAINERS, ENTREPRENEURS, INDUSTRIALISTS, POLICY MAKERS, SCIENTISTS, AND TYRANTS. BUT THE RESULT IS A DETERMINED, DEFIANT, EARNEST, BRILLIANT, PHILANTHROPIC, SPACE-GOING, SMOKING-HOT (PAGE 121 ONLY) GROUP, AND TOGETHER THEY ARE WRITING THE FIRST CHAPTER OF THE REST OF OUR LIVES.

*STARTING THINGS OFF: A reclusive, 70-year-old Indian industrialist . . .*

# Bjørn Lomborg

- Economist, environmental activist, 43
- Copenhagen, Denmark

## THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD By Bjørn Lomborg

**W**hen thinking about the future, it is fashionable to be pessimistic. Yet the evidence unequivocally belies such pessimism. Over the past centuries, humanity's lot has improved dramatically—in the developed world, where it is rather obvious, but also in the developing world, where life expectancy has more than doubled in the past 100 years. Malnutrition has dropped from 50 percent in 1950 to 17 percent today and poverty from 50 percent to 25 percent. Access to clean drinking water has gone up from 30 percent in 1970 to 80 percent today, while illiteracy has dropped from 80 percent to 20 percent. Consider this: The most pessimistic UN predictions expect the average Bangladeshi in 2100 to be as rich as the average Dutch is today.

In the rich world, the environmental situation has improved dramatically. In the United States, the most important environmental indicator, particulate air pollution, has been cut by more than half since 1955, rivers and coastal waters have dramatically improved, and forests are increasing. And these trends are generally shared by

all developed countries.

Yet we constantly fear that the future will overwhelm us, though this often comes from faulty analysis. We worry about the seemingly ever-increasing number of natural catastrophes. Yet this is mainly a consequence of CNN—we see many more, but the number is roughly constant, and we manage to deal much better with them over time. Globally, the death rate from catastrophes has dropped about fifty-fold over the past century. We also worry that global warming will increase flooding and hurricane damage. And yes, sea levels will rise by up to two feet over the coming century. But we must remember that over the last 150 years, sea levels rose one foot, and nobody noticed. We adapted.

This underscores our need to start thinking smartly about challenges to our natural environment. Often our intuition will focus on the spectacular problems like climate change or deforestation, but that is not necessarily the best place to intervene. Silent and dispersed problems are often much more important.

The main environmental challenge of the 21st century is poverty. When you don't



know where your next meal is coming from, it's hard to care for the environment for 100 years down the line. When your kids are starving, you will slash-and-burn the rainforest; when you're rich, you'll be a Web designer and vote green.

The single most important environmental problem in the world today is indoor

air pollution, causing about 1.5 million deaths annually. It is the result of poor people cooking and heating their homes with dung and cardboard. But the solution is not environmental—to certify dung—but rather economic: to make these people rich enough to afford kerosene.

How do we make a better world? This question was answered by the Copenhagen Consensus project. Eight of the world's top economists (including five Nobel laureates) established a global priority list based on elaborate assessments by 50 leading specialist economists.

At the top of the list is preventing malnutrition, followed by free trade, vaccinations, and agricultural R&D. These are the areas in which we can do the most good per dollar for the world. Cutting CO<sub>2</sub> to combat climate change, despite all the media attention, came at the bottom, because it costs a great deal and does little good.

The future of the world will be much better than the past. The trick is to worry about the right things first.



## Al Gore

- Former vice-president, environmental activist, 60

**AL GORE IS A LUNATIC.** If you've ever seen the man speak in person, well, it's hard to know whether or not he's putting you on. He is so over the top that you are tempted to laugh. You do laugh. Think about it: There's this oversized man in a suit at least two sizes too large alternately yelling at you about how our planet has a fever and how you aren't treating it and then, suddenly, pausing as if in thought (though he has given this talk thousands of times), extending his left hand in front of him as if holding poor Yorick's skull, examining the tips of his fingers as if the words he is about to say or the idea he is on the verge of is balanced on his digits. And then he begins to speak again, calmly building to an overwrought explication of the apocalypse.

It's amazing, funny, and borderline crazy. And it's clearly working.

We, as a culture, always reject the lunatic fringe and then inexorably move toward it. We mocked PETA and then, 20 years later, we're lobbying Congress to pass legislation securing the rights of dogs. And when the lunatic is a former vice-president who went on to win both the popular vote and a Nobel Prize, our willingness to embrace that fringe is enhanced.

So when he stood before us this past summer and claimed that within ten years a combination of wind and solar power can produce all of our country's electric energy needs, it was both preposterous and strategically brilliant. He set a ridiculous goal, but it's the very lunacy of it that may push us closer to a goal devoutly to be desired. Gore is a crazy man. And that is the key to his influence.