

## Clearing the air on climate change

Talking to Bjorn Lomborg

Sarah Lynch



Author and academic Bjorn Lomborg is the director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center. (Photo by Emil Jupin)

Danish author and academic Bjorn Lomborg has such controversial views on climate change that Al Gore will not debate him. While he thinks global warming is real, he campaigns against immediate measures to cut carbon emissions, arguing that they are not cost effective.

Lomborg became well-known in 2001 for his controversial book "The Skeptical Environmentalist," in which he argued that many widely-published views on environmental matters are flat-out wrong.

In 2004, Lomborg ranked on Time Magazine's list of the world's most influential people. He was among Foreign Policy's 2010 list of the 100 Top Global Thinkers, and was named one of the "50 people who could save the planet" by the UK Guardian in 2008. He is the director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center and an adjunct professor at the Copenhagen Business School.

Lomborg talked to NOW Lebanon about the ways he thinks the world can battle global warming, and what he believes might be causing Lebanon's changing weather patterns.

**Q This year, Lebanon is experiencing different climate patterns than people have seen in the past. The country has essentially skipped over the fall season. Not only this, but winters over the past several years have been warmer than they were five or ten years ago. Is it accurate to assume that this is because of global climate change?**

**Lomborg:** I'm a social scientist. I work a lot on climate issues, but I'm not a climate scientist, so that has to preface everything I say here.

I believe global warming is real. Global warming is happening. It's man made, partially man-made. So yes, we are going to see climate change. With that said, we have to remember that the weather has always been changing. There is a tendency to prescribe anything we can see to a global issue like climate change right now to give it meaning. But it could just be an anomaly. It could just be a statistical fluke, or simply a natural change...

If you look at the changeover in the Pacific Decadal Oscillation in 1976, we saw a change around most of the Pacific Ocean, and that's probably not related to global warming, yet it does impact the way the weather has been around most of the Pacific Ring.

And there have been long studies, for instance, from Egypt, where we have 4,000 years of water history from the Nile. And if you look at those you can identify 800 years when the Nile had less water flowing through it. And those people would have thought, 'My god, we're moving toward a terrible low.' But if we look at it in context of the longer time span, that was again, if you will, a long-term fluke.

With that said, Lebanon or the Eastern Mediterranean will get warmer, and it will get drier. Those are two very constant outcomes of global warming models...

### **Do global climate change and global warming need to be dealt with urgently?**

**Lomborg:** We need to deal with global warming. But there is no way we can deal with global warming immediately. Even if we did everything Al Gore asks for, even if we did everything that even the most stringent climate policies were expecting, and even if we managed to cut the global emissions to half of the 1990 levels by 2050, we would not be able to see the difference in temperature over the next forty years. We would be able to see the difference by the end of the century, but nothing we do now will make any significant change except for in a very long time from now.

That's why we need to recognize that dealing with global warming is like changing the course of a super tanker. And that's why I have constantly tried to point out that if you're going to be successful in this, you need to long term dramatically cut carbon emissions, rather than focus on the short-term and cutting a little, symbolically, at a very high cost.

### **You've argued that spending billions of dollars on reducing carbon emissions is a waste of money and that resources can better be spent elsewhere, such as on fighting HIV/AIDS or Malaria, for example. What issues do you think rank higher, in terms of priority, than climate change at this point in time?**

**Lomborg:** There are two points to this, one short term and one long term. If you look at the current way we tried to deal with global warming, the only policy on the books right now is the EU 2020 policy. That's the only legally-binding climate deal we have in the world, which is cutting 20 percent of the 1990 levels by 2020 in the EU. That will cost about \$250 billion per year.

After having spent about \$20 trillion, or \$250 billion every year for the rest of the century, we will have reduced temperatures by 1/20th of one degree Celsius. We will basically do nothing. We won't even be able to measure the impact for \$20 trillion. That's a bad deal...

Remember that half the world population lives without food, or clean drinking water, or sanitation, or basic education, or electricity...

We should spend \$100 billion on research and development of green energy. That will fix climate change in the medium term. And the beautiful thing is, then you can spend another \$100 billion on dealing with all the major challenges that mankind faces right now. We could get clean drinking water, sanitation, basic healthcare, and education, and food to everyone who needs it for about \$100 billion per year...

### **This is still considered a rather alternative viewpoint compared with much of the discourse out there. Do you feel you are having an impact on the debate regarding carbon emissions? Are there more people today who are willing to look at alternative strategies when it comes to cutting carbon emissions?**

**Lomborg:** I definitely think there are a lot of people. Two things have happened. One is the breakdown in Copenhagen, which made it clear to everyone that we're not actually managing to cut carbon emissions in the way that we've talked about. Not only is it a bad economic strategy, but it also turned out to be a politically unviable strategy...

But I think more likely, a lot of politicians are looking for ways to get out of the corners that they've painted themselves into. And that's what this approach really offers—a smarter, better way. It's a way to unpaint yourself from the corner. We're still not there in the sense that everyone is on to the new

agenda, but I think most people recognize the old agenda isn't working. From there, it's a short jump to saying, "Let's go for a new, smarter, cheaper and more effective way to tackle global warming."

**2** **One of your ideas is to have 1,900 ships travel the oceans and shoot enormous amounts of water into the air to reflect the sun's energy. Some people have argued that while this is interesting, it's a bit ridiculous. Defend your position on why you think this is a good solution.**

**Lomborg:** We have very well-established studies from *Nature* and many other well-esteemed magazines that indicate that if we shoot water into the lower atmosphere, we could actually put up a little more sea salt, which would make clouds a little bit whiter over the South Pacific, which would actually reflect a little more sunlight and hence cool the planet.

The total cost of avoiding all the temperature rises of the 21st century from global warming would be about 1,900 ships, as you just mentioned, or about \$6 billion in total. Potentially, this approach holds the promise of tackling global warming at a cost of somewhere between 1,000 and 10,000 times cheaper than anything else we are talking about...

I'm not saying that we should build 1,900 ships and send them out tomorrow, but I am saying that we should look at it, we should experiment with it, we should find out if it works, both because it could be a great way to buy us a few more decades to phase in green energy, and it's also the only way that we can deal with catastrophic climate change, that is if something really bad was going to happen like a Greenland ice shelf suddenly breaking up, or something like that...

**2** **People often talk about rising sea levels. Al Gore says that sea levels could rise up to 20 feet. Is this really a threat, and if so, how would it affect a city like Beirut?**

**Lomborg:** Two things. Sea level rise is happening, not so much because Greenland or glaciers in general are melting, but because water, like everything else, expands as it gets warm.

The UN climate panel is expecting sea levels to rise between 18 and 59 centimeters by the end of the century. Most likely, about 30 centimeters...

It will have costs for Beirut. It will necessitate more defensive sea works, like small dykes, like building a metro with extra high steps, being careful with how you project plans- all those kinds of things that we routinely do. And it will have a cost. The cost is estimated at around 0.05 percent GDP of most countries...

But it's not the Al Gore sea level rise of six meters, which is 20 feet. That was purely for effect. And that's just not in the cards. And saying so I think is one of the reasons why we've had so many problems with the global warming approach, because while scaring people senseless makes for great attention grabbing, it doesn't actually make for good policy making...

**2** **If you were to have a debate with Al Gore, who considers climate change to be an absolute emergency, what is the first thing that you would say to him?**

**Lomborg:** I'm not sure I can just say one thing. The three things I would probably put to him is, "Al Gore we agree that global warming is a problem that we need to fix." It's very obvious that your solution, the Kyoto-style approach, has failed politically and I think we need to recognize that. It is failing economically as well.

And then the third one is, "Would you agree that, as some of the world's top climate economists are telling us, the best way forward is to make green energy cheap for innovation?"

**2** **Are you optimistic about these issues?**

**Lomborg:** We definitely need a lot of action. We should also recognize that we have a significant amount of time because no matter what we do and talk about, it will really only matter toward the middle of the century.

But we also need to remember that on the overall scale of things, global warming is a problem, but it is not the end of the world. It's one of the many challenges that we need to fix in this century.

But just to give you a sense of proportion, if we don't manage to do anything about global warming, by the end of the century, the total cost of global warming is estimated by most models in the order of 2 to 5 percent of GDP. It's not nothing, but it's not 100 percent.

At the same time remember that the average person in the developing world is estimated by the UN to be about 2,400 percent richer by the end of the century. If you look at those two numbers, there is a good cause for optimism...



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