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## Climate change is a practical problem, not a moral one

Has 'skeptical environmentalist' and scourge of Greenpeace Bjorn Lomborg really had a change of heart and turned green? Er, no, he tells *spiked*.

Rob Lyons

**"Skeptical environmentalist" and critic of climate scientists to declare global warming a chief concern facing world', declared the front page of a British broadsheet newspaper in August this year. It suggested that recent comments made by the Danish author Bjorn Lomborg were 'an apparent U-turn that will give a huge boost to the embattled environmental lobby'.**

Really? Did Lomborg, long known as a critic of the crankier wing of environmentalism, really have a massive change of heart? 'In reality, what I've always said is that global warming is real', he tells me. 'I've always pointed out that it is often exaggerated for effect, to create panic, and that's why we're making bad decisions. I've always pointed out that Kyoto Protocol-style efforts to tackle global warming are a bad idea.'

So what's new, then? Lomborg explains that recent research, elaborated both in his 2007 book *Cool It* and in his new film of the same name, shows that 'investing in green energy research and development rather than investing in green energy technology provides a big difference in policy efficacy'.

But perhaps this illustrates a subtle difference that climate campaigners won't be able to comprehend. While debate rages about whether or not we should trust the science behind the belief that the planet will get a lot hotter in the future, Lomborg is trying to engage public and political opinion on an entirely different discussion: if global warming is real and likely to be a significant problem in the future – as Lomborg has consistently argued – then what is the best way of tackling it?

As *Cool It* the movie shows, getting the world's leaders to sign up for greenhouse gas emissions targets has been a failure. The Kyoto treaty failed to reduce emissions. The Copenhagen summit a year ago opened with great fanfare, but utterly failed to produce a global agreement. The current UN climate conference in Cancún, Mexico has been widely ignored by the media because there is little prospect of fast-developing countries like China and India signing up to a global deal to limit emissions while hundreds of millions of their people still live in poverty.

So, if the world is going to get warmer, what's the solution? On the one hand, we have the schizophrenic responses of greens, scientists and policymakers who either believe we must have hairshirt solutions involving significant cuts in living standards (as [Neil Davenport](#) discusses elsewhere on *spiked* today) or we must accept that it's too late and anyone with any sense should take to the hills to live in a teepee. On the other hand, there are those – usually pejoratively labelled 'climate deniers' – who believe the problem is grossly exaggerated, many of whom see the entire discussion as a way to introduce state socialism by the back door.

While many sceptics may quibble with Lomborg's acceptance of the IPCC as our best guide to our climate future, his approach is utterly different from most greens and leading politicians. Lomborg sees the problems of climate as solvable at relatively low cost, given the right policies, which will enable us to reduce emissions in the long term without compromising social and economic development. For many greens, who have seen global warming as the big scary stick with which to beat the idea of economic growth, this is a profoundly dangerous idea. No wonder that in the film, we see one leading activist scientist, the late [Stephen Schneider](#), describe Lomborg as a

dangerous man who must be 'taken down'.

Lomborg's basic approach has always been a ruthless cost-benefit analysis. Through his project, the Copenhagen Consensus, he's asked leading economists and researchers to come up with a list of the world's great problems, with each problem ranked according to the benefit that could be obtained from the available solutions. Previously, Lomborg had argued that the solution on offer for climate change – globally agreed emissions cuts like the Kyoto protocol – was pointlessly expensive. He thus put other issues like tackling malaria or vitamin deficiency ahead of global warming. Now he argues that a different approach is possible – which is why climate change has shot up his list of solvable global problems.

'If you do the standard Kyoto-style solution', he tells me, 'you do a couple of pence worth of good for every pound that you spend. But if you spent that same pound on energy R&D, you'd avoid £11 worth of climate damage – that's 500 times more benefit. That's why I'm suggesting we should be spending real money on tackling climate change, but we should be spending it smartly not stupidly.'

The aim is to make low-carbon technologies – some of which exist, some of which are waiting to be discovered – cost-competitive with the energy sources that we use now. When solar, wind, wave, geothermal, nuclear and so on are as cheap and reliable as oil, gas and coal, it will be a no-brainer to switch to these technologies. At the moment, however, those climate-friendly technologies are expensive and not very reliable. It's that gap that Lomborg hopes can be closed by further research and development.

That still leaves us with tricky questions about how the money is raised and how it could be best spent. Isn't this just another smart alec policy guru trying to spend the world's money? 'If this was about saying "Bjorn wants to decide how we spend \$100 billion", then it would be a terrible idea', he assures me. 'But research is cheap, because researchers are cheap. Moreover, we all agree that this is a good idea in relation to medical research. We don't expect pharmaceutical companies to do blue-sky research or Nobel research. We expect them to take almost-marketable products to market.'

In other words, we need to get to a point where companies can make a profit from low-carbon energy without the need to prop them up with massive subsidies. As *Telegraph* columnist Christopher Booker has argued about the giant windfarm recently opened at Thanet, off England's south-east coast, the company running it will probably be paid twice as much in subsidies for its electricity as it will actually charge for the juice. And that power won't be produced when we need it, but when the wind happens to blow. That doesn't mean renewables will never be a useful energy source, it simply means they are too expensive right now and there are still some significant technological hurdles to be overcome to get the most out of them.

But can't the market solve these problems on its own? Lomborg thinks not: 'If, for example, solar panels are 10 times as expensive as fossil fuels and I'm the guy that makes them only five times as expensive as fossil fuels, that's a great social breakthrough, but I still can't make money off of it. We need public investment in long-term research and development, just as we do for medical research, and I'm proposing that it's the same sort of process that we do for green energy.'

Getting nations to agree to a global energy research fund might be almost as tricky as a Kyoto-style deal. Who pays what? Who benefits from the research? But Lomborg is at least pointing to the fact that, for a relatively small sum (in the film, he talks about a total global fund of \$250 billion to be spent over many years on research, adaptation and Third World development), we could go a long way to solving not just the climate problem but opening up whole new energy sources for humanity and preparing countries for whatever kind of climate change we face in the future: hot, cold, wet or dry.

To put that amount of money in perspective: that's 0.4 per cent of the world's economic output per year. Moreover, that \$250 billion would be spread over many years. That is a fairly trivial price to pay for a wide range of benefits.

The great benefit of Lomborg's work in recent years is that he categorically refuses to treat the issue of climate change as a moral crusade, instead approaching it as a practical problem. This distinguishes him both from greens, who use the climate-change problem to hector humanity about its hubris and force us all to live meeker, less stuff-filled lives, and also from many in the

sceptical lobby, who seriously believe that in taking on environmentalists they are battling against a great big conspiracy of socialists disguised as polar bear-loving hippies. As climate negotiators in Mexico waste another two weeks – and an awful lot of money on flights and hotel bills – banging their collective heads against a brick wall, a policy proposal that puts its faith in humanity's ability to innovate and to solve problems seems a far better option than trying to grind out a miserable deal to limit development.

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**Watch the trailer for *Cool It*:**

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