



# A Changed Climate Skeptic?

Bjorn Lomborg has long infuriated environmental activists with his contrarian views on global warming. Has he now embraced their cause?

INTERVIEW BY ELIZABETH DICKINSON | SEPTEMBER 3, 2010



It seemed too sensational to be true. On Aug. 30, [the Guardian](#) reported that one of the world's most prominent "climate change skeptics," Bjorn Lomborg, had made an apparent about face, now calling for \$100 billion to be devoted to stopping global warming. This is a man who, for years, writing books with provocative titles like *The Skeptical Environmentalist* and *Cool It*, had argued that climate change wasn't as pressing as other international problems, such as child malnutrition and poverty. Now, he seemed to be saying that stopping global warming was an urgent matter after all. Had the Danish political scientist changed his mind? Was he admitting he'd been wrong? What would this new \$100 billion be used for?

In an exclusive interview with **FP's** Elizabeth Dickinson, Lomborg says his views haven't budged an inch. Rather, he argues that the cap-and-trade approach of Kyoto Protocol fame has clearly failed, and it's time to try a more creative approach -- one that doesn't involve wasting billions of dollars. "At some point," he says, "we have to ask ourselves, do we just want to keep up the circus of promising stuff but not actually doing it?" Excerpts:

**Foreign Policy:** You've been in the news quite a lot this last week thanks to your new book, *Smart Solutions to Climate Change*, which many are portraying as a change of heart on climate change. Is that accurate? Have you changed your mind about global warming?

**Bjorn Lomborg:** No. I always said that global warming's real, it's man-made, and that it is important. The economic models indicate that global warming is going to impact negatively GDP by the end of the century, by somewhere between 5 percent and 2 to 3 percent.

The fundamental point I try to make, though, is that the current set of solutions isn't working. Since 1992, we've been trying to cut carbon emissions by [holding] grand international get-togethers where everyone promises [to cut emissions]. But unfortunately nothing happens and nobody delivers. This book is about asking: Are there other and smarter ways? I helped organize something we call the Copenhagen Consensus on climate, where we brought together 28 of the world's top economists to look at all the different possible solutions to climate change and ask, "How much will it cost and how much climate damage will it avoid?" These top economists, including three Nobel laureates, ranked the smarter solutions. What they found was that the best long-term solution to climate change is dramatically increasing research and development on green-energy technology. [That means getting] green energy to be so cheap that everybody wants some. Don't try to make fossil fuels so expensive that nobody wants to use them. That's not going to work politically, and economically it also turns out to be a very poor way to help the world. Instead, make green energy so cheap that everybody wants to use it.

**FP:** Where does energy efficiency fit into that equation?

**BL:** That is one of the things that we should be investing more research and development in. [But] I would be somewhat cautious [about saying] that that's going to be a huge driver. The fundamental issue here is not to tinker at the margins. By all means, replace your light bulbs with energy-efficient ones and eventually LED lights. By all means, buy a Prius. But also recognize that this is not what's going to change the outcome. If we want to have a world that's eventually not emitting carbon dioxide, it requires a dramatic change in energy production. Instead of using a little less of the power that comes out from your coal-fired power plant, make solar panels so cheap that they replace coal-fired power plants.

**FP:** In *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, you write optimistically about the impact climate change will have on agricultural production. Are you now concerned about how global warming will affect farming?

**BL:** It's very clear that one of the things we will need to do is to develop new varieties of agricultural produce. They'll be better able to deal with warmer weather -- that's especially true in the Third World. We should also recognize that we already have a huge challenge ahead of us because we're going to be feeding about 50 percent more people toward the end of the century, or more. We'll need to feed them better because they're going to be richer.

[But] we need to be careful. The models also indicate that the impact of global warming in a well-functioning market system is fairly small. If you look at the models, the worst-case scenario is that global food production by 2085 will be 1.4 percent less than it otherwise would have been. The best-case scenario is that it will be 1.7 percent above. It is going to have a little impact but it's not going to be the major challenge in the 21st century. We're talking about food production reaching in 2086 what it would otherwise have reached in 2085 without global warming.

**FP:** What about extreme weather? Some people would point to the floods in Pakistan, for example, as a manifestation of what's ahead.

**BL:** We know that there's going to be more precipitation and that would be consistent with more flooding. [But] we have quite a number of studies in Uruguay, [where there were] big floods in 2000-2002, that seem to indicate that a fairly small part of the flooding could be ascribed to global warming.

Of course the [main] reason that we're seeing flooding is because we've built on a lot of flood plains. So what you're probably seeing in the vast majority [of cases] is an increase in bad infrastructure decisions that have then caused a lot of these floods to be so dramatically damaging.

This gets back to the whole point of asking, "If you want to help Pakistan, how do you do that in the best possible way?" Do you do that by cutting carbon emissions which, even if there is a link, there's probably a fairly weak link and it will only help in 100 years? Or do you help them by focusing on making better infrastructure decisions?

My point here is to be the skeptical environmentalist, not skeptical of global warming -- that's true, that's happening, and that is man-made -- but to ask: If we want to do good, what are smart policies? Proposing to make carbon cuts is really, really hard, and we've seen it fail for the last 18 years. It's probably also not the best way to actually go about doing good for the world. And presumably, that was what we wanted. I doubt very many people care whether there's more or less carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. What we care about is that we actually make lives better for our kids and grandkids.

**FP:** How do we know that it's really a zero-sum game -- that if we don't tackle climate change, we can invest more heavily in smart infrastructure policies, or malnutrition, or one of the other many global needs out there?

**BL:** It's not a perfect zero-sum game. On the other hand, I do think we need to own up to the fact that the international community seems to have hard time worrying about a lot of different things. I'm not saying that climate should drop off the page. I'm simply saying, right now we seem to be obsessed with pretty much the only solution that we have conclusively seen doesn't work and that the economists have very clearly pointed out is a very poor way of tackling the problem. At some point, we have to ask ourselves, do we just want to keep up the circus of promising stuff but not actually doing it?

For every dollar you spend on traditional carbon policies -- even if you do them well -- the benefits could be measured in just a few cents. That's a poor deal! If you invest dramatically more in research and development of green energy technology, however, for every dollar you spend you can probably avoid about \$11 of climate damage. We can do 500 times more good if we do it right.

I actually do believe that there's at least a certain amount of zero-sum game, because as long as everybody talks about Kyoto, that's the only real issue on the agenda. And what we [actually] need to start talking about is dramatically ramping up investments in research and development of green energy.

**FP:** In 2005, you wrote in **Foreign Policy** that those of us in the rich world have reached the point where we can afford to think about the environment, whereas the developing world really can't. If we're talking about a research and development solution, isn't that really just a developed world solution? Is there some sort of role for the developing world in this also?

**BL:** I think we need to own up to the fact that the developing world has much more important priorities. We're unaware that half the world's population still lacks simple things like food and education and water and

sanitation and health care. Worrying about global warming [that will happen] 100 years from now is a slight luxury to those people. It doesn't mean we shouldn't do it, but it means that we should also recognize that there are many other things we should be focusing on.

The only real climate policy that we have right now is the EU 2020 policy -- that they're going to reduce [emissions by] 20 percent below the 1990 levels by 2020. The cost is about \$250 billion. Let me give you a better way to spend that money. If we spent \$100 billion on research and development into green energy, we would do much, much more good. If the EU continues to spend \$250 billion for the rest of century, they will reduce temperatures by 0.1 degree Fahrenheit by the end of the century. Wow! I'm really sure our descendants are going to be really really happy.

If we invested that \$100 billion dollars [in research] there's a good chance we will be able to cut maybe two degrees Fahrenheit off the temperature by the end of the century. Then, we should invest about \$50 billion in different ways to adapt to climate change -- that's of course especially [important] in the Third World, to make sure that they can actually deal with climate change. And then I propose that we should spend about \$1 billion dollars in research and development into geoengineering to make sure that we have an insurance policy if something really bad is lurking in the corners of climate-change research. The last \$100 billion should be spent on fixing all of the other problems in the world: Give clean drinking water, sanitation, basic healthcare and education to virtually everyone on the planet. We could do that for about \$100 billion a year.

**FP:** Geoengineering has been so controversial lately. What specifically do you think are the means we should pursue? Are you worried at all about externalities we won't or can't anticipate?

**BL:** The reason why the Nobels did not say: Let's deploy [geoengineering] now is exactly because we haven't spent very much money on looking at it. Could this potentially affect, for instance, the monsoon? We want to know before we start.

On the other hand, we have to recognize that even if we do dramatic things to deal with climate change (which is a very, very unlikely scenario to have happen), we would not be able to measure the difference in temperature come midcentury. We don't have anything that can do anything [about] climate change fast except for geoengineering.

And geoengineering is potentially incredibly cheap compared to virtually everything else we talk about. If you look at marine cloud whitening -- making clouds a little whiter by putting up sea salt into the lower atmosphere -- we could actually pretty much offset all of global warming in the 21st century. The total cost of that would be about \$6 billion to \$7 billion in total. The cost of a 2 degree Centigrade policy [limiting climate change to 2 degrees through other methods] could easily be \$40 trillion a year. We're talking about 5,000 times less [expensive], and only once instead of every year.

The only model that has ever been built wasn't built on public money. It was paid for by the Discovery Channel for their show on geoengineering. There's something fundamentally wrong with having to rely on public entertainment to figure out potential solutions to the big problems.

**FP:** Politically, what's the best way to inject fresh energy into climate policy?

**BL:** We've got to stop discussing global warming as if it's a contest between: Is global warming the end of the world, or is it a hoax perpetrated in the American people? It's neither. I think in some ways, the fact that the *Guardian* made it look like I flip-flopped is because it's so hard for anyone to see the world through any other prism than "It's either black or white -- it's a hoax or it's the end of the world."

It seems like we're still debating if the world is round or flat. I mean, come on, it's round. But the real question for Christopher Columbus was: How do I best get to the West Indies? And that's the real issue: How do we plot a course to get from A to B. That's what this book is all about. It's about finding the smartest ways to get to that point.



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