



The Skeptical Environmentalist Finds Hope for the Human Condition

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By James K. Glassman

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Bjorn Lomborg isn't one to abandon his politics just because he strays from the established line on the environment. The Danish statistics professor would rather solve the pressing problems of the world effectively. Tech Central Station Host James K. Glassman recently spoke with Lomborg about how his views have evolved into a new book entitled, "The Skeptical Environmentalist." The one-time Greenpeace member talks about sorting environmental scares from real problems, and using the developed world's talents and resources to aid undeveloped countries. "Since global warming is primarily about helping the Third World," he said, "we have to ask ourselves is this really the best way to help the Third World -- to spend an enormous amount of money to just postpone warming for six years?" Lomborg, instead, looks to safe drinking water and sanitation as immediate solutions achievable at a fraction of the Kyoto treaty's cost. "The Skeptical Environmentalist" will appear in U.S. bookstores in early October.

James K. Glassman: You have said that you actually started researching your book, "The Skeptical Environmentalist," to debunk what you believed to be the myth of the late libertarian economist, Julian Simon, that resources were plentiful in supporting a growing world population. Where in the process of that research did you realize that in fact Professor Simon was right?

Bjorn Lomborg: It was a very gradual thing. I bought his book and decided that it looked sufficiently good, that it was actually worth debunking. It wasn't just a crackpot thing. So, I gathered 10 of my best students, and we decided to go through the book; and get alternative references; and see where this was wrong; but also, at the same time, get a feel for what the world was like. We got this gradual sense of, "Wait a minute, this is actually what is stated in many of the UN references and many of the internationally recognized statistics." That was what made us slowly turn around and say, "Wait a minute. Why is it that this just does not match up with what we usually think?"

I think it's important to say, that, of course Simon is now dead. So it's kind of hard for him to defend himself. But I think at some point he was very lax or even just held some of his viewpoints on faith, saying, for instance, the declining sperm count is probably just going to be another one of those scares that will turn out to be wrong. And I think that's a little too cavalier.

But on many of the most important accounts I thought he basically had a good point.

Glassman: And the thrust of this work showed what?

Lomborg: That when you look at the issues that are important to human beings, on all accounts, things are getting better and better. We have more food, fewer people starving. We have better income, both in the industrialized but most importantly also in the developed world. We have higher education, fewer people who are illiterate, fewer people starving, more spare time, fewer accidents. On all of the important accounts, things are going better and better.

Now, obviously the important question in that respect is can this go on? What I found was a less clear cut answer in Julian Simon's book. He dealt with some of the issues, but I think it's important to go the whole way around and look at all of our resources, all the inputs that are important for our future well-being.

Glassman: One of the points you made is that starvation is not as rampant as either Malthus or Paul Ehrlich, who is very much opposed to what Julian Simon was saying,

predicted in that "agricultural technology has squeezed ever more food out of each hectare of land." Lately Europe seems to be on something of a rampage against the next logical event in agricultural technology, bioengineering or genetic modification. Do you think it poses a threat?

Lomborg: Well, it doesn't pose an immediate threat. There is a problem in the long run of not understanding that this is important to the Third World. Europe has had a lot of food scares, and while they may be minor, there's certainly the feeling that people haven't been told all. And there's certainly been a sense that the genetically modified foods, GM foods, were sort of put through without proper debate. So, I think it's important.

The GM debate has been an important one in the sense that we need to communicate and get out the facts better, get the possible risks and also the possible concentration of power in a few global companies. But on the other hand, it's also very important to get people in Europe to understand that it has costs, especially for the Third World, if we do not proceed down this road. There are probably many environmental benefits and economic benefits and health benefits for the Third World adopting GM Foods.

Lomborg on the latest from the IPCC

"[T]here is very little in the new IPCC reports on what this is going to cost us. It just doesn't help to say if there is a problem we need to solve it."

Glassman: In the case of climate change, you accept the data of the IPCC models that have been set up for temperature ranges as I understand it, but not the conclusion that stiff regulation of fossil fuel use is needed right now. Is that right?

Lomborg: Yes. I think it's also important to say the IPCC does not make any policy recommendations. That is, it does not actually go in and say we should then do something like Kyoto. It's clear that a lot of the scientists behind it back the Kyoto understanding, but that's not an official IPCC policy. The idea here is, again, we need to have a good understanding of what the world looks like and what it's likely to look like in the future. We cannot know what the future will be, and I try to point out there's probably an inherent tendency in the IPCC to be slightly pessimistic.

All big bureaucracies have those tendencies. It's a way to make sure they don't make a mistake that won't later come back and haunt them. So, it makes sense to say that maybe we get a slightly pessimistic view from IPCC. But it's the best information we have.

However, there is very little in the new IPCC reports on what this is going to cost us. It just doesn't help to say if there is a problem we need to solve it. We have to ask ourselves how much can we do. How much is it going to cost and how much is it going to help? Then I try to say the Kyoto agreement, even if it was completed in full and the U.S. participated would do almost no good. It would postpone warming for about six years longer than 2100. On the other hand, it will cost an amazing amount of money. The average estimates are \$150 billion to \$350 billion a year. That's three to seven times the amount of global aid we give to the Third World.

Since global warming is primarily about helping the Third World, we have to ask ourselves is this really the best way to help the Third World -- to spend an enormous amount of money to just postpone warming for six years? My argument is to see that even for a fraction of that cost we could solve the single biggest problem in the world. We could give clean drinking water and sanitation to every single human being on Earth for less than what Kyoto will cost the U.S., and that would save two million lives a year. It would save half a billion people from getting seriously ill each year.

Glassman: Let's go back to the original premise of my question. Do you have any concerns about the climate change models considering the fact that the National Academy of Sciences and others pointed out that they really have gigantic gaps in them?

Lomborg: Well, I think we all would love them to be better. And there are a lot of things we have left out. On the other hand, it's the only way to build models. You take some of these things in there and try to refine them. So, while I think that there's a lot of tendency towards being pessimistic both in the inclusion of different parameters and the way that the results have been interpreted, the way you have simplified the global models and

several other things, it's very hard to do much better than what the IPCC does. So, I agree that there's a lack of knowledge. There is a tendency toward pessimism. But we really have to say this is probably somewhat the best model we can get.

Glassman: You earlier said that even if Kyoto is implemented, it really won't do very much; if there is a real problem with climate change, you feel that we will solve it through technological change. You place a lot of faith in technology solving problems. Is that correct?

Lomborg: Well, no. It's not a matter of faith here. The point I'm trying to make is that there are various scenarios and we have to look into the 21st century and see what's going to happen. But the top scenarios are the ones that give weight to 5.8 degrees warming are just simply unrealistic in the sense that they require us to rely incredibly heavily and use very, very much fossil fuel at the end of this century. When you realize that renewable energy resources have dropped in price about 60 percent per decade over the last three decades, they're likely to at least drop approximately at that rate in the coming decade. That means that renewable energy resources will be competitive or even out compete fossil fuels before mid century. And if that's true, then it's simply unlikely that we will continue to use massive amounts of fossil fuel at the end of the 21st century. So, this is really a discussion about whether we want to face that warming five years earlier or five years later if we commit more to research and renewable energy resources. Now, notice I'm only talking about renewable energy resources. We may all be surprised if it turns that it's fusion energy or something we haven't even thought of yet that will take over. But at least we know we have reliable energy resources that probably will take over by mid-century.

It's not a question of placing incredible faith that we will get some sort of solution that we can't quite figure out right now. We actually have the technology. It's only a question if we should wait until it's competitive, and it will be.

Glassman: And you're saying this technology is solar or wind power?

Lomborg: Solar, wind power, yes. Solar in the long run, certainly.

Glassman: Is it also possible that within a fairly short amount of time we will have feasible carbon capture technologies?

Lomborg: Yes, there are loads of other issues, technological fixes that we could also explore. It makes sense to me that we should look into those, especially because we may be able to solve a fairly big problem, namely, global warming, for a fairly small amount of money. Then, obviously, we should do that.

Lomborg on media coverage of the environment

"It would help journalists if the public was critical of green groups as well as business groups. Then it would be easier for journalists also to be critical of green groups."

Glassman: You've taken the media to task for reporting bad news without reference to actual results. Is there any specific advice that you could give journalists when they look at scientific data, before they report it to readers?

Lomborg: There are two things here that are important. One is to make people aware of the media having a negative slant. But I think the media basically give the public what the public wants. We know from countless studies that people love bad news. It's very hard. Even if you tell journalists you shouldn't do it, most journalists will say, "Oh yeah, we shouldn't do that." But their editors will make sure that they do it anyhow.

My argument says to people that we should realize that we get oversupply of bad news and that we cannot just say the world looks like what it says in the paper. We only see part of the story in the paper. The other part, of course, is to realize that green organizations are only lobby groups, just like business organizations. We are very critical when business organizations say, "Oh, don't worry so much about the environment." We should rightly be critical of them. We should also be critical of green organizations that say, "If we don't act now, the Earth will be doomed." So we have to be critical of both.

It would help journalists if the public was critical of green groups as well as business groups. Then it would be easier for journalists also to be critical of green groups.

Glassman: You have made the point that you are an academic, and you have no ties to industry or any other group. And that issue is frequently brought up -- also by the press about industry -- that its research might be biased. Isn't this often a bogus argument, a way of attacking research, its funding, instead of the facts? Can't research that is funded by industry or funded by environmentalists be just as important as research that is not funded by anybody other than, let's say, a university, which may have its own biases?

Lomborg: It's a hard question. I take your point in saying that in a sense you could argue all science could be equally biased. But we have better ways of controlling to what extent it's biased when it's publicly financed, or financed through a very open organization like a university. So you will have an uphill battle. It's important to have that criticism, certainly of industry-funded research. Let's face it, there's a lot of PhDs out there and at least some part of their research I'm fairly convinced you can actually buy, if not outright, then at least get some sort of the result you want.

So I think it's important to focus on integrity and unbiasedness. Of course, you should also realize that many of the studies that are produced by the EPA, or certainly for the Danish EPA, will also have, certainly, an indirect bias, because these people performing the research know that they will have to get money again from the EPA. So there is a tendency that these guys will have a certain interest in not annoying them too much.

Glassman: There is an intense debate going on in the United States right now about what to do at the next UN climate change meeting in Marrakech COP-7 at the end of October. What do you think is the appropriate step that the U.S. and the entire group should take at this point?

Lomborg: That's a hard question for me to answer. There are two things to say here. I'm trying to be a scientist saying if we want to do good for the Third World, here's how should we deal with this. That really means that this is a slightly wrong place to try to deal with the world's problems. Because with climate change, we're trying to do very little good for very much money when we could do a lot more good if we spend that money elsewhere. In a sense, I'm saying the world's politicians are talking in the wrong forum.

But I would imagine that there are two things the U.S. could do. One, it should step up research in renewable energy resources. It's my understanding that Bush has already said that he wants to increase that. But since the U.S. is funding \$200 million right now in renewable energy research and development, that could be stepped up tenfold and it would cost nothing compared to the Kyoto agreement.

The other thing, and where the U.S. could get on the offensive, is offering the EU and other partners to step up their research. Let's actually try to do good for the Third World and simply try to start a new way of talking about what we should do in the UN assemblies. Let's actually pledge and commit 0.7% of our GDP to developing countries, or spend one-fourth of what the Kyoto agreement would cost and give that to the Third World.

It would either make a lot of money for the U.S., or it save a lot of money for the U.S. It would certainly show that this is not ill will toward the Third World, but it's actually in the interest of spending money well.

Lomborg on modernizing education, health care and disease control

"All those things they are very, very cheap compared to what we're talking about with global warming."

Glassman: As far as the areas that money could be committed, you talked about clean water and general sanitation. Another thing that Professor Sallie Baliunas, who is the co-host of Tech Central Station, has pointed out is that rather than fighting global warming over a long period of time as a means of preventing malaria, maybe we should simply go straight to the source and immediately take care of the malaria problem that's facing the Third World.

Lomborg: There are so many investments in the Third World that would help the Third World so much more: education, disease regulation, general health care, infrastructure. All those things they are very, very cheap compared to what we're talking about with global warming. That would help the Third World right now immensely. It also would enable them to deal much better with global warming when it comes, because it will come no matter whether we do Kyoto or not.

Glassman: When you say enable them to deal with it more effectively, I guess you're saying we need to build the economy, build the infrastructure first.

Lomborg: Yes, because these are problems they will have to tackle in 50, 100, or 200 years there. It's important that they're rich, so that they will be able to deal with those problems. We know that there is no malaria where there's a strong health system, even if the region is naturally disposed to malaria. In the same way, if you have a strong economy, if you have well built-out education and infrastructure, you're able to deal with changing climate patterns and grow new crops better suited to a new climate.

All those things are basically a question of education, infrastructure, and economy.

Glassman: Last question, it was Lord Keynes who said to someone who accused him of being hypocritical, "When the facts change, I change my mind. And what do you do, sir?" But Thomas Jefferson said, "Argument only makes people more adamant in their opinion." So, how difficult was it for you to change your opinion on these key environmental issues? At any point did you simply want to give up on the project that you were working on regarding Julian Simon?

Lomborg: No, not at all. That's why I'm an academic; I want to find out what is true. It's much more fun to be right on a controversial issue than to be right on a trivial issue. It's much more fun to say the sun is in the center of the universe, when everybody thinks the Earth is the center of the universe, than going around saying the Earth is round today, when everybody knows it is round. So in that sense, it's great inspiration to have good arguments and try to improve the public debate. What you actually find is that most key players, yes, they have a fixed view. And if you make arguments, they only get more adamant.

But these players are just playing out the arguments in the general debate for the public. The public then actually makes up its mind. I find that people are well aware of and capable of listening to a good argument and picking out good arguments. Certainly in Scandinavia, it has given rise to a lot of people saying, "Maybe there is a point to be made here. Maybe all things are not getting as bad as we think." It's not the same thing as saying that I wonder whether most people believe I'm absolutely correct. I think a lot of people are starting to say there's probably something to it. That's about as good as it gets in a public debate.

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