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The Ridiculous Global-Warming Freakout

by *Tunku Varadarajan*

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Bjorn Lomborg is back with a new, controversial movie about global warming. Tunku Varadarajan talks to him about the right way to deal with climate change.

Bjorn Lomborg is one of the best-known (and most controversial) participants in the global debate on climate change. A professor at the Copenhagen Business School, he founded the Copenhagen Consensus Center, an organization that brings together many of the world's leading economists to ponder the great environmental and material questions of our time—in particular, the question of whether we are getting our priorities wrong in focusing as obsessively (and expensively) as we do on manmade global warming, instead of on other problems such as clean drinking water, or malaria.



Cool It, 2010. (Courtesy of Roadside Attractions)

The author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, a book that catapulted him to fame—and notoriety—in 2001, Lomborg was breezing through New York to publicize his new film, *Cool It*. (Directed by the skillful Ondi Timoner, it is released this week.) In between his various TV appearances, Lomborg and I had this email exchange.

Tunku Varadarajan

Hi Bjorn, It's a treat to have you in conversation with The Daily Beast. I just saw your compelling new film *Cool It*, and wondered if you see it as an antidote to Al Gore and *An Inconvenient Truth*, his film on global warming. Is *Cool It* the anti-*Inconvenient Truth*, as it were?

Bjorn Lomborg

It is a pleasure to talk to you and thanks for the compliment! We're getting a lot of people watching the film and coming out of the theaters saying, "Yeah, we should tackle climate change, but smartly." It is very gratifying.

I don't actually think of the film as an antidote to Gore—more like a moving-on. Gore got our attention and pointed out that global warming is real, but he also scared the pants off people, and hysteria makes for pretty poor political judgment. So, this film acknowledges Gore's fundamental point: Global warming is real, manmade and important. But it does two important things: It rolls back the fear by pointing out that global warming is not the end of the world, and it shows us lots of ways in which we can start tackling climate change smartly and efficiently.

Varadarajan

"Global warming is real, manmade and important. But it's not the end of the world..." You wrote that once. Do you still believe that 100 percent? The Guardian newspaper recently said you'd made a U-turn on the subject, that you'd "changed your tune"...

Lomborg

Absolutely, I still believe that. This I have said from the very beginning, including in my book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. At the same time, I pointed out that the current approach to tackling global warming, namely Kyoto-style policies where we promise large carbon cuts (and then often don't do them) are incredibly costly ways of doing very little good.

Lomborg

However, recent research, both from the Copenhagen Consensus and from my book *Cool It*, shows that there is a much better way to tackle global warming: namely to dramatically increase research and development into green-energy technologies. Thus, for the last three years I have been advocating that we should be spending much more money on R&D into green energy.

However, when I say that the current approach to global warming is poor, people think I am denying global warming, and when I say we should be spending money on research and development into green energy, people say I've been making a U-turn. That, unfortunately, is really only a testament to the very polarized debate in which global warming takes place today.

Varadarajan

Why is the debate so darn polarized?

Lomborg

That is a very good question. I think part of it is due to the nature of the debate: It is easier for the people who predict the worst-case outcomes to be heard, and similarly it is easier for the people who entirely reject those propositions to be printed in response. However, it is entirely crucial for our ability to tackle global warming that we enable ourselves to have a more nuanced debate, a place where we can find a middle, or third road, where we can recognize the reality of global warming while not having to subscribe to the poor, ineffective Kyoto-style policies.

I hope that the film will make a connection with the vast majority of Americans who indeed are in the middle of this conversation, tentatively subscribing to global warming, but unwilling to commit vast resources to amazingly poor policies.

Allow me just to give you one example: The European Union's "20-20" policy, which will reduce emissions by 20 percent below 1990 levels in 2020, will cost \$250 billion per year for the rest of the century. Yet after spending \$20 trillion, it will only have reduced temperatures by a minuscule 0.1°F. This simply is not smart.

Varadarajan

Bjorn, what do you think of the American "conservative" politicians who deny that anthropogenic warming exists? Whom do you consider the greater danger, the environmentalist seeking to politicize climate science (including tampering with evidence, as has been reported from the "Climategate" affair), or the grandstanding senator denying its findings and deductions altogether?

Lomborg

The overwhelming evidence points to the reality of anthropogenic global warming. Even very skeptical scientists such as Richard Lindzen at MIT and Patrick Michaels point out that more CO₂ in the atmosphere means higher temperatures. This is really rather simple physics. I think the complete denial is more of a political response to many of the over-the-top global-warming predictions and their consequent draconian policy measures.

I think both extremes prevent us from finding a middle and smart road to tackle global warming, although given that the scared policy response globally seems to be much more prevalent, it seems reasonable to say that it is this stance that carries more of the responsibility for the global negotiations getting nowhere over the last two decades.

“I think complete denial is more of a political response to many of the over-the-top global warming predictions and their consequent draconian policy measures.”

Varadarajan

Two policy questions, one obvious and one perhaps less so. Obvious: What do you think of cap-and-trade versus a carbon tax? Less obvious: To what degree can/should advanced countries act unilaterally without waiting for a grand global bargain?

Lomborg

Although carbon taxes and a cap-and-trade scheme should, in theory, have similar outcomes, the propensity of cap-and-trade for pork-barrel politics and waste means that it would be even less effective than a carbon tax. With a tax, it is obvious who pays, and how much. With a cap-and-trade system, the costs are hidden and shifted around. Carbon-emission reductions based on poorly designed cap-and-trade systems could be significantly more expensive than the estimates for carbon taxes. But the larger point, obviously, is that neither a drastic carbon tax nor a cap-and-trade scheme is a responsible policy response to global warming.

Lomborg

On the second question: It would be preferable to have a global bargain, and I actually think it is possible to get one. Fundamentally, we should be asking for governments to spend 0.2 percent of GDP on research and development into green energy. This is 50 times as much as we spend today, yet it is much less than what is typically being proposed to spend on inefficient Kyoto-style policies. Since it is so comparatively cheap, it is much more likely that we could get every nation on board (and developing countries would be paying proportionally less). But even if not everyone were on board, it would still make sense to move forward. In that sense, some countries could move ahead, fund the R&D and take us much closer to tackling global warming, without everyone participating.

Varadarajan

How do you see the world 100 years from now, environmentally?

Lomborg

I would hope and expect that in 100 years we see a world in which almost all people are much better off (remember the IPCC, the U.N. climate panel's estimate that the average person in the developing world will be about 24 times richer by the end of the century than they are now). A world where we've dealt with urgent global challenges like HIV/AIDS and malnutrition and water/sanitation issues by prioritizing spending on those issues. A world in which India and China and other developing countries can afford not only to feed their populations and provide health care and education, but also to care about the environment—because we've seen that countries don't start to invest in environmental policies until they are wealthy enough to do so.

I would like to see a world where we have adapted our cities to reduce the urban “heat island effect” (where cities are much hotter than the countryside around them—this fundamentally means creating more green spaces and more lighter-colored surfaces). And I'd like to see a world where we have invested in adaptation so that the poorest parts of the world—where global warming's effects will be worst—are much more resilient. And a world where a significant technology-led investment has seen us end our dependence on fossil fuels and thus rein in temperature rises.

Varadarajan

What do you think of nuclear power?

Lomborg

Nuclear power has the potential to tackle a lot of our CO₂ emissions. However, as it stands now, new plants are still two or three times more expensive than similar fossil-fuel plants. Thus, we have to have R&D on the fourth generation and see if this will bring the price down significantly.

Varadarajan

People call you a "solutionist." Can you give us some examples of fruitful and responsible ways to respond to climate change?

Lomborg

No fix to global warming will work overnight. So we need to focus more on adapting to the effects of global warming—for example, by stepping up efforts to cope with inland flooding and the urban “heat island” effect. At the same time, we should explore the practicality of climate engineering, which we may need to buy more time for a smooth transition away from fossil fuels. Some technologies, as we highlight in the film, show great promise and we should proceed cautiously with research. And we need to invest much more in research and development of green energy.

The big problem with the call for drastic carbon cuts is that it ignores the fact that despite all the hopeful talk about solar, wind, and other green-energy technologies, carbon-emitting fuels like coal and oil are still far cheaper and more efficient energy sources. This is why we continue to be so overwhelmingly dependent on them. We need to stop putting the cart before the horse and pretending we could cut carbon emissions now (by taxing them) and solve the efficiency problem later. The most fruitful and responsible approach is not to try to make carbon-emitting fuels too expensive to use, but instead figuring out how to make green

energy cheaper.

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