

Opinion & Analysis

Climate sceptics seek to muddy the waters on global warming



JOHN GIBBONS

Climate sceptics have an unlikely ally in the articulate Danish author, Bjorn Lomborg

THE EMISSION of greenhouse gases ... is causing global warming at a rate that is simply unsustainable in the long term," said former UK prime minister Tony Blair. "And by long term I do not mean centuries ahead. I mean within the lifetime of my children certainly; and possibly within my own."

His comments signalled clearly that the debate on global warming is over. In truth, climate scientists have known this with virtual certainty for decades, but getting the message through to political and economic elites has been agonisingly slow.

This process has been hampered in no small way by well-funded "climate scepticism" campaigns orchestrated mainly by groups with a clear financial interest in the status quo. Their tactics have been closely modelled on the earlier techniques Big Tobacco used to successfully fend off tighter regulation of cigarettes for decades.

And, of course, the media loves a controversy, with two sides supposedly slugging it out. The fact that it may be a bogus debate is usually lost in the cut and thrust of claim and counterclaim.

The climate sceptics today have an unlikely ally in the articulate, media-savvy Danish statistician and author, Bjorn Lomborg. He shot to international attention in 2001 with the publication in English of his book, *The Sceptical Environmentalist*.

His latest volume, *Cool It*, continues in a

similar vein. It certainly looks impressive, with more than 1,100 notes and a bulging bibliography. On one level, Lomborg differs from the usual sceptics, as he actually accepts that global warming is a fact.

However, Lomborg and climate science part company when he says: "Many other issues are more important than global warming." He argues that it would cost too much and achieve too little to attempt to curb the root cause of global warming, ie greenhouse gas emissions, most notably CO₂.

Today, Lomborg will speak at an Irish Management Institute conference, *Achieving Sustainable Success: Building a High Performance Ireland*, at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Powerscourt, Co Wicklow. The title of his talk is *Saving the Planet: what would you do?*

This is interesting because, while Lomborg is often portrayed in the media as a renegade environmental scientist, one who challenges the cosy consensus and tackles the taboo areas other scientists won't touch, he has no formal qualifications whatever in climate science, nor has he had a paper published in a major peer-reviewed journal on this topic.

This is important, given that he repeatedly challenges and often dismisses out of hand the findings of climate scientists, including many who spend their professional lives carrying out first-hand research in this field.

While some are dazzled by Lomborg, he also has his detractors. The Danish

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Committees (*sic*) on Scientific Dishonesty severely censured him over his book, which they said "does not present the appearance of a scientific work but precisely that of a provocative debate-generating publication".

However, controversy sells, and Lomborg's books are bestsellers. What he lacks in competence in climate science, he more than makes up for in confidence. His polemic style of writing is engaging, pacy and persuasive.

And, let's face it, there is a ready and eager audience for climate scepticism. Who

wouldn't want to believe that things are going to be just fine, and that we don't really have any tough choices to make? This is a simple pitch to sell.

"His facts are usually fallacies and his analysis is largely non-existent," says Prof Stuart Pimm of Columbia University in the US.

Peter Raven, president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, added: "The environment is a field where, when people do some light calculations like Lomborg did, it's easy to argue for a happy-times kind of conclusion."

The ruling of the Danish committees against Lomborg should, Dr Raven added, "bring his credibility to a halt, except for those who desperately want to believe what he says". Lomborg however had the last laugh, as the committees acquitted him on appeal of the most serious charge of "scientific dishonesty" (while still criticising his biased and selective use of data).

Lomborg argues, for instance, that instead of spending, say, \$50 billion (€32 billion) on tackling global warming, we would get much better value by, say, buying mosquito nets to tackle malaria, or improving water quality in the Third World. Quite why he feels we should not do both, and simply divert a tiny percentage of global military spending, for instance, to pay for it all, he never expands.

Also, Lomborg's economics-based world view places little or no value on the

preservation of natural habitats or on the rights of any other species to exist.

Lomborg further contends that all we really have to worry about in the 21st century is a slight shift in temperatures and a minor rise in sea levels. This is a wildly optimistic reading of the available published data. It also explicitly ignores the real risk of abrupt, non-linear climate shift.

Lomborg is the colourful cuckoo in the nest of the climate-change debate. To take him at face value requires that you first reject every major published report and every major agency in the field, from the UN to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in the last 20 years. Our unsustainable lifestyles present "a challenge so far-reaching in its impact and irreversible in its destructive power, that it alters radically human existence", is how Tony Blair summed up the challenge of climate change.

Lomborg frequently criticises others for holding dogmatic or hysterical positions on climate issues. Yet, when he writes that "cutting CO₂ simply doesn't matter much for most of the world's important issues", he himself is flying in the face of physics.

Lomborg would be a lot more persuasive if he applied the same rigour to his own use of data as he demands of others.

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