



## Cooler Heads Prevail

(Published in *National Review Online*, October 22, 2007)

Steven F. Hayward

Colaboraciones n° 2055

November 21, 2007

Is there really anything new to be said about climate change? Hasn't the issue become the public-policy equivalent of Groundhog Day, with the same arguments playing out in the same way every week?

Perhaps there is. The weary and repetitive character of the climate-change debate is masking a number of fundamental changes now taking place that, 20 or 30 years from now, are likely to be recognized as the turning point on the issue. Despite the relentless media and advocacy-group frenzy, the case for catastrophic global warming is fraying around the edges. The alarmists have found themselves suddenly hoist by their own petard, as the latest massive report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noticeably reined in its predictions of future doom and

gloom (less sea-level rise, lower temperature rise, admissions of serious problems in its climate models, and so forth). Having thumped skeptics about ignoring the IPCC-certified "consensus," the alarmists are now criticizing the IPCC for being "too conservative." Increasingly it appears that the problem of climate change is likely to be more modest and manageable than the heated rhetoric would have you imagine, just as the apocalyptic 1960s predictions of the "population bomb" turned out to be wrong.

It is increasingly apparent even to the Kyoto Protocol's European cheerleaders that the Kyoto approach is a dead end. Meanwhile, up on Capitol Hill, the new Democratic leadership talks a big game on climate change but is considering only the most modest of measures,

which, if eventually brought to a vote, will probably degenerate into another pork-fest and subsidy game. Seldom if ever has there been a larger gap between the rhetoric and the legislation being considered. It's as if Lincoln and the Republicans of the 1850s had said, "Slavery is evil; therefore let us adopt tax incentives, impose a few regulations on slave auctions, and subsidize the production of new farm equipment."

The alarmists say the lack of dramatic action (such as, e.g., a 50 to 70 percent cut in greenhouse emissions over the next 40 years) is due to the opposition of the "denial industry" and fossil-fuel interests, but this is a convenient fiction. The real problem is that no one is willing to enact measures with the gargantuan costs that would be involved. Eventually even environmentalists are going to come to see that global warming is the issue that ate them alive. And policymakers are going to begin looking at alternative perspectives on how to deal with the actual problems of climate change.

This is where Bjørn Lomborg comes in. Lomborg burst on the scene in 2001 with *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, pointing out that the data do not support the familiar green "litany" of planet-wide calamity. For this heresy, environmentalists have predictably compared him to Holocaust deniers and worse. He followed up this effort with the "Copenhagen Consensus," an ambitious convocation of top social scientists (including several Nobel laureates) that aimed at ranking global priorities such as AIDS, malnutrition, wa-

ter supplies, and climate change. No matter how the methodology was sliced up, climate change came in last on the list. For this, the head of the IPCC compared Lomborg to Hitler. "What is the difference between Lomborg's view on humans and Hitler's?" the IPCC's Rajendra Pachauri said to a Danish newspaper in 2004. "If you were to accept Lomborg's way of thinking, then maybe what Hitler did was the right thing."

Having already resorted to the exhausted *reductio ad Hitlerum*, environmentalists will be hard-pressed for new invective to use against *Cool It*, Lomborg's new book focusing exclusively on climate change. Notwithstanding Lomborg's major concession that "global warming is real and man-made" and is "beyond debate," environmentalists will not be happy. Lomborg questions "whether hysteria and headlong spending on extravagant CO<sub>2</sub>-cutting programs at an unprecedented price is the only possible response." Any competent economist can tell you that deep CO<sub>2</sub> reductions fail every cost-benefit test; this is true even of economists, such as Yale's William Nordhaus, who accept the catastrophic-global-warming scenario.

Environmentalists, along with most liberals, snort at cost-benefit analysis--an attitude best expressed by a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* several years ago from environmental "archdruid" David Brower that bore the headline: "Economics Is a Form of Brain Damage." The virtue of *Cool It* is that Lomborg effectively translates the aseptic lan-

guage of cost-benefit analysis into persuasive plain English (for wonks, a longer and more technical version of *Cool It* is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press).

Consider the case of a persistent cause of over 1.2 million deaths, 50 million injuries, and a half-trillion dollars in damages worldwide every year. Then ponder that a simple policy change could eliminate nearly all of this harm. The cause: automobile accidents. The remedy: Lower the speed limit to 5 miles per hour. But of course no nation would ever do this, because it would make us so much poorer. The benefits of auto use outweigh the risks, such that we don't even consider a modest reduction in speed limits, which studies show would significantly reduce auto-accident casualties. Instead, we invest in safer highways, air bags, seat belts, and other means to reduce the human cost of driving.

The use of fossil fuels presents the same tradeoff. As Lomborg states, "the benefits from moderately using fossil fuels vastly outweigh the costs." If anything, Lomborg understates this point. The tradeoff for arguably increasing the average global temperature by 0.8°C in the 20th century has been nearly a doubling in life expectancy, a huge decline in infant mortality, and the steadily increasing spread of middle-class prosperity across the planet's population. Does anyone outside the tiny ranks of environmental extremists really wish we had not made this progress, which depended vitally on cheap energy? Acknowledging this calculus is en-

vironmentally incorrect, but it is the silent ground upon which practical policymakers will build policy. There simply is no near-term, large-scale alternative to fossil fuels. Deal with it.

Some climate skeptics will criticize Lomborg for conceding too much about the certainty of our knowledge of human-caused climate change. But he is doing an important service in changing the dynamics of the debate. And if it turns out that some or all of the warming we experience is the result of natural factors, then Lomborg's adaptation strategy will be all the more important. By the end of *Cool It*, Lomborg has neatly turned the tables on the emotional rhetoric of the alarmists: "I hope that in 40 years we will not have to tell our kids that we went for a long series of essentially unsuccessful command-and-control Kyotos that had little or no effect on the climate but left them poorer and less able to deal with problems of the future."

Lomborg thinks we should aim at modest reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions, invest heavily in energy research, and devote resources to adapting to changing conditions. Eventually, policymakers throughout the world are going to come around to Lomborg's point of view (indeed they already are, if the tenor of the recent APEC meeting in Australia is any indication), though they will do so kicking and screaming and with multiple genuflections toward the alarmist totems. Al Gore and other true believers won't ever be persuaded, but one day, perhaps

not long from now, they are going  
to wake up to discover that the

world has passed them by.