

July 8, 2006

COMMENTARY: THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

DOW JONES REPRINTS



Bjorn Lomborg

Get Your Priorities Right

By KIMBERLEY A. STRASSEL

July 8, 2006; Page A10

NEW YORK -- Bjorn Lomborg is a political scientist by training, but the charismatic, golden-haired Dane is offering me a history lesson. Two hundred years ago, he explains, sitting forward in his chair in this newspaper's Manhattan offices, the left was an "incredibly rational movement." It believed in "encyclopedias," in hard facts, and in the idea that mastery of these basics would help "make a better society." Since then, the world's do-gooders have succumbed to "romanticism; they've become more dreamy." This is a problem in his view, and so this "self-avowed *slight* lefty" is determined to nudge the whole world back toward "rationalism."

Well, if not the whole world, at least the people who matter. In Mr. Lomborg's universe that means the lawmakers and bureaucrats who are charged with solving the world's most pressing problems -- HIV/AIDS, malaria, malnutrition, dirty water, trade barriers. This once-obscure Dane has in recent years risen to the status of international celebrity as the chief advocate of getting leaders to realize the world has limited resources to fix its problems, and that it therefore needs to prioritize.

Prioritization, cost-effectiveness, efficiency -- these are the ultimate in rational thinking. (It strikes me they are the ultimate in "free markets," though Mr. Lomborg studiously avoids that term.) They are also nearly unheard-of concepts among the governments, international bodies and aid groups that oversee good works.

Mr. Lomborg's approach has been to organize events around the globe in which leaders are forced to think in new ways. His task is certainly timely, with groups like the U.N. engaged in debate over "reform," and philanthropists such as Warren Buffett throwing billions at charitable foundations. But, I ask, can the world really become more rational? "It's no use just talking about all the great things you'd like to accomplish -- we've got to get there," says Mr. Lomborg.

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Bjorn Lomborg busted -- and that is the only word for it -- onto the world scene in 2001 with the publication of his book "The Skeptical Environmentalist." A one-time Greenpeace enthusiast, he'd originally planned to disprove those who said the environment was getting better. He failed. And to his credit, his book said so, supplying a damning critique of today's environmental pessimism. Carefully

researched, it offered endless statistics -- from official sources such as the U.N. -- showing that from biodiversity to global warming, there simply were no apocalypses in the offing. "Our history shows that we solve more problems than we create," he tells me. For his efforts, Mr. Lomborg was labeled a heretic by environmental groups -- whose fundraising depends on scaring the jeepers out of the public -- and became more hated by these alarmists than even (if possible) President Bush.

Yet the experience left Mr. Lomborg with a taste for challenging conventional wisdom. In 2004, he invited eight of the world's top economists -- including four Nobel Laureates -- to Copenhagen, where they were asked to evaluate the world's problems, think of the costs and efficiencies attached to solving each, and then produce a prioritized list of those most deserving of money. The well-publicized results (and let it be said here that Mr. Lomborg is no slouch when it comes to promoting himself and his work) were stunning. While the economists were from varying political stripes, they largely agreed. The numbers were just so compelling: \$1 spent preventing HIV/AIDS would result in about \$40 of social benefits, so the economists put it at the top of the list (followed by malnutrition, free trade and malaria). In contrast, \$1 spent to abate global warming would result in only about two cents to 25 cents worth of good; so that project dropped to the bottom.

"Most people, average people, when faced with these clear choices, *would* pick the \$40-of-good project over others -- that's *rational*," says Mr. Lomborg. "The problem is that most people are simply presented with a menu of projects, with no prices and no quantities. What the Copenhagen Consensus was trying to do was put the slices and prices on a menu. And then require people to make choices."

Easier said than done. As Mr. Lomborg explains, "It's fine to ask economists to prioritize, but economists don't run the world." (This sounds unfortunate to me, although Mr. Lomborg, the "slight lefty," quickly adds "Thank God.") "We now need to get the policy makers on board, the ones who are dealing with the world's problems." And therein lies the rub. Political figures don't like to make choices; they don't like to reward some groups and not others; they don't like to admit that they can't do it all. They are political. Not rational.

So all the more credit to Mr. Lomborg, who several weeks ago got his first big shot at reprogramming world leaders. His organization, the Copenhagen Consensus Center, held a new version of the exercise in Georgetown. In attendance were eight U.N. ambassadors, including John Bolton. (China and India signed on, though no Europeans.) They were presented with global projects, the merits of each of which were passionately argued by experts in those fields. Then they were asked: If you had an extra \$50 billion, how would you prioritize your spending?

Mr. Lomborg grins and says that before the event he briefed the ambassadors: "Several of them looked down the list and said 'Wait, I want to put a No. 1 by each of these projects, they are all so important.' And I had to say, 'Yeah, uh, that's exactly the point of this exercise -- to make you not do that.'" So rank they did. And perhaps no surprise, their final list looked very similar to that of the wise economists. At the top were better health care, cleaner water, more schools and improved nutrition. At the bottom was . . . global warming.

Wondering how all this might go over with Al Gore, I ask Mr. Lomborg if he'd seen the former vice president's new film that warns of a climate-change disaster. He's planning to, but notes he wasn't impressed by the trailers: "It appears to be so overblown that it isn't helpful to the discussion." Not that Mr. Lomborg doesn't think global warming is a problem -- he does. But he lays out the facts. "The

proposed way of fixing this -- to drastically reduce carbon emissions now and to solve a 100-year problem in a 10-year time frame, is just a bad idea. You do fairly little good at a fairly high price. It makes more sense to solve the 100-year problem in a 50-year time frame, and solve the 10-year problems, like HIV-AIDS, in a five-year time frame. That makes sense, and is the smart way to spend money."

Slipping into his environmentalist's shoes, he also says people need to get some perspective. "The U.N. tells us global warming will result in a sea-level change of one to two feet. It is not going to be the 30 feet Al Gore is scaring us with. Is this one to two feet going to be a problem? Sure," he says. "But remember that this past century sea levels rose between one-third and a full foot. And if you ask old people today what the most important things were that happened in the 20th century, do you think they are going to say: 'Two world wars, the internal combustion engine, the IT revolution . . . and sea levels rose'? It's not to say it isn't a problem. But we fix these problems."

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Perhaps Mr. Lomborg's greatest coup at the recent Copenhagen Consensus event was getting the attention of John Bolton, a foe of U.N. inefficiency and bureaucratic wheel-turning. "I called Bolton's secretary and we finally got them to agree and she said 'Okay, you can have him for one hour.' And I said 'No, we need him for two days.' And she laughed her heart out and said 'That's never going to happen.'" But happen it did, and Mr. Bolton was an enthusiastic supporter, appearing with Mr. Lomborg to announce the results of the exercise and lamenting that too often at the U.N. "everything is a priority." There is already talk of a bigger U.N. event in the fall.

Still, it strikes me that simply getting the top folks to prioritize (which itself would be a minor miracle) is only a start. How does Mr. Lomborg intend to deal with a compartmentalized bureaucracy, where every unit claims it is sacred and each one is petrified of losing funding? Here, Mr. Lomborg himself turns a little less rational and a little more political. It's no accident that the consensus organizers tell its participants to consider what they'd do with an "extra" \$50 billion. "Most of these guys, the day-to-day guys at the U.N., went into their business to 'do good.' And we need to appeal to that bigger sense of virtue. The best way to do that is talk about 'extra' money, so that they aren't worried about losing their own job."

Mr. Lomborg hopes that prioritization up top will inspire "competition" down below. "Most people work in their own circles -- malaria guys talk to malaria guys, malnutrition guys to malnutrition guys. But if they understand that there are other projects out there, and that they also have price tags, and that the ones with the best performance are the ones that will get the extra money -- you start to have an Olympics for best projects. And that means smarter ideas for how to solve problems." In fact, Mr. Lomborg wishes there were more Al Gores. "It's good we have someone educating about global warming. But we need Al Gores for HIV/AIDS, Al Gores for malnutrition, Al Gores for free trade, Al Gores for clean drinking water. We need all these Al Gores passionately roaming the earth with power-point presentations, making the case for their project. Because at that point, the real Al Gore would be slightly sidelined, since he's arguing for the most expensive cure that would do the least good."

Mr. Lomborg is smart enough to realize that what really bothers political leaders with this approach is that "it would be launching a ship and it's unknown where it will land. That makes people uncomfortable." A Copenhagen Consensus exercise for the Inter-American Development Bank in Latin

America or for the Environmental Protection Agency in the U.S. (both of which Mr. Lomborg is working to organize) could result in findings that suggest the leaders of these organizations have been throwing good money after bad for years.

"Right now, politicians know that in public they have to say they support all things, and suggest there is an infinite amount of money to give to an infinite amount of good causes. Semiprivately, they know that if they have 10 good causes, the easiest thing is to give one-tenth of the funds to each -- so there are no complaints. But privately they know there isn't enough money for everything and that they probably should have given most of it to the one or two groups that would do the most good."

At the very least, the Copenhagen Consensus might make it harder for public figures to defend bad decisions. "If you have a rational list that tells you that you do a lot more good preventing HIV/AIDS, then those in favor of such projects have slightly better arguments. Those arguing for climate change have slightly worse arguments." And while this may not change the world, it could be a start. "The Consensus isn't about getting it perfectly right," says Mr. Lomborg. "It's about getting it slightly less wrong."

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