

BCO Conference – Challenging Conventions
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Plenary Session: Greenpoint or Greenwash? The Environment in a Recession
Transcript of Question & Answer Session

Present at Table:

Rab Bennetts – Chair

Bjorn Lomborg – Author of 'Environmental Skepticist' and 'Cool It'

Michael Pawlyn – Director of Exploration Architecture

Rab Bennetts (RB): Now I know what it is like sitting between a landlord and a tenant negotiations

I think at a point like this, it is only fair that the speaker's work is being questioned, to have a short reply and then Michael can do the same again if that is necessary. So, can you do a couple minutes and then we'll open the floor, open the debate to the floor, because we've still got quite a bit of time left, we are pretty much on time. So do a couple of minutes and see if we can get the debate going in the hall, and I'll ask you if you want to do the same. If you want to?

I'm going to give Bjorn an opportunity to respond and then I'll come back to Michael.

Michael Pawlyn (MP): Fine yeah.

Bjorn Lomborg (BL): Michael had a lot of points about why I was wrong. I'd like to engage in just a few of them. He told you how the Himalayas are going to see diminishment of the glaciers and this affects possibly even the water availability for 40% of the world's population. This is true. But let's take a look at what Michael might actually propose we should do. We should cut carbon emissions, which essentially means that the woman who lives in the shadow of the glaciers in Nepal will see the diminishment of the glacier outflow in 2051 instead of 2050. Now her kids don't have education, they probably have malaria – her brother has probably just died from malaria, or typhoid. They have very little food and what are we telling her is: "We want to help you infinitesimally in fifty or a hundred years" when what we should do is give them better infrastructure to deal with that water, yes, and what we should do is deal with those problems that they actually need. I think it's breath-taking the amount of arrogance that lies in the argument of saying "I want to help these people by spending enormous amounts of money to do virtually no good".

But let me just, because Michael has made a few very substantive points – err, he said that I didn't quote some of these people – err, I would like to show you. I actually have it right here. It's simply wrong. He said I didn't quote Hansen. I quote Hansen twice – I have two of his books. I don't quote Terry Emmanuel – I quote him three times. So this is just wrong, but the more important point of course is that this underlines a lot of the argument that Michael says "It's easy to be a sceptic – now look at this map, you can pick out a few examples'. Actually if you notice what I try to do and what makes it much, much harder to sell my argument than what Michael does, is I actually look at averages. I look at global numbers. I do actually try to make those arguments because those are the only right ones.

Instead Michael very often engages in saying "Look at this example or look at that example". Now I've no doubt that there are good examples out there. I commend you for it. If we can sell it and if it works – great. We will expect to see an increase in CO2 efficiency of 1% each year. We are probably going to have to turn that up even faster. We've seen that for the last hundred and fifty years because of smart people like Michael and many others. I congratulate you but that's not the issue that we are talking about.

We are not talking about the free lunch here. If there are free lunches out there people will eat them – great, but that’s not the issue. It’s all the other things that won’t happen unless we make them intelligent and there you have to ask the question “So what are we going to do? What should we actually do?” And Michael loves to cite just some people. Yes I cite the UN climate panel report on sea level rise, and yes there are estimates out there that it could even be 5cm more. But these estimates that he showed, scientists met in Copenhagen this year and said that it was one meter. Lets just remember, those are some of the scientists who are very, very vocal, and I made this criticism also in *The Guardian*, very, very vocal already back in 2007 saying ‘it should be much higher than what the un climate panel said’. That’s great, there should be debate in science, but we shouldn’t be swayed by the few who argue very, very high numbers. That’s why we have the thousands of scientists to tell us what is the outcome and not just the ones that we pick ourselves. You said that Stern was a radical, and sort of like “Huh that’s ridiculous!” Yes he is an incredible radical. Virtually all climate economists have criticized him very very roundly. Virtually everyone has said that he was wrong. He was asked by the British Government, and we know this because *Nature* actually said that in their review, they asked two other people to write the report that eventually they asked Stern to do. Both of these people said “No”. Why? Because they were asked by the British government to come out with the result that Stern eventually came out with. It was already a given from the start.

Now, he is a great guy, I’ve met him several times and he probably believes what he is saying. But it doesn’t mean that he’s not a radical. It is in the 96th percentile what he came out with. So, let me just summarize: Michael says we should “Astonish the gods”. No. What will astonish the gods is that, we are asking and we are arguing to spend so much, to do so little. I’m sure the gods will be very, very astounded by that but I would much rather have us actually work for humanity and spend the money in the best possible way. I’m sorry. Again - this is not a debate about who can sound the nicest. It is a debate at the end of the day about who can actually end up doing the most good for the world.

RB: Do you want to come back for 2 minutes

MP: Sure. Thanks.

Well Bjorn is a great speaker and an accomplished statistician.

I’m no expert or a scientist so I like to keep things simple.

And I confess to having been somewhat confused about climate change until recently - how could there be such wildly different opinions on a subject that ought to be really quite scientific?

So I started reading both sides of the argument. I read Bjorn’s books and I read the scientist’s debunking of them. I read Bjorn’s response to the rebuttals and then I read the rebuttal to the rebutted rebuttal. And after a while I got pretty fed up.

So I decided to just start phoning people up.

I phoned up one of the directors of the World Glacier Monitoring Service and I said “What do you think of Bjorn’s statements about glaciers” and he said, well, the fact of the matter is the data simply does not support his statements. I then phoned one of the authors of the polar bear report who was really pretty fed up actually with the way that Bjorn had, used not only out of date information, but had completely distorted the conclusions of the report. And the more I read, the more I realized that there was this sort of pattern unfolding of distortions and highly selective use of data. And some of these were so outrageous that it actually reminded me of a Mark Twain quotation which is “He uses statistics the way a drunk uses a lamppost – more for support than illumination”

You know, What Bjorn was just saying there – maintaining that cutting carbon emissions is going to be inordinately expensive well once again he is using very out of date information. McKinseys concluded that we can stabilize at 450ppm at zero nett cost. All those examples I was showing there – they're not unusual. Woking Borough Council – that's well documented. The BREEAM 'Excellent' schemes show what we can achieve as an industry. So Bjorn's statement that cutting carbon emissions is enormously expensive is simply out of date.

RB: I think that's a good note on which to open it up to the audience. I think there's um, there's a general thread running through all of that about the world, globe and all the rest of it but actually this is an office conference and we might just be talking a little more specifically about the subject we are all interested in. And I just wondered if I could ask a few people in the audience to comment on, or maybe one person could make an observation about whether it is costly to make an office building reasonably low carbon. I'm not talking about nil carbon; I'm not talking about saving the planet in one building. Does anyone have any information out there that they would like to share on this subject, because if it is horrendously expensive we ought to know about it but I suspect we have more information.

Question / comment (abbreviated): Hello. I can just say that we are currently developing our own offices BREEAM 'Outstanding' building . . . (and it's going to) cost 140 pounds per square foot. Very, very challenging to get to those figures . . . but it's a very economic way to achieve BREEAM 'Outstanding'. I hope that they do, because I don't think we can get it any less.

RB: Anyone else got a comment that they would like to chip in or open up another subject for debate? I'm looking for some hands. There is one over there.

Question / comment from audience: I'd like to open up the debate because you can't actually talk about offices without talking about other uses. I found it very refreshing hearing what Bjorn is saying, because I think, we are, the government is now very much pushing the climate change agenda. And as we heard this morning in the planning session, we have got to a point now where climate change is becoming more important than housing people within the UK and I think that is something that needs to be addressed, and so we're not even going as far as the Himalayas actually as a problem in the UK. So I do wonder if in fact, to a certain extent, you are both right. What Bjorn was saying, is that the planet isn't going to explode, we can cope. But I do think we have become very much a throw away economy, and really we need to sort of address that. And what Michael was saying was that there are certain things we can, we probably don't have to go the whole way, but actually we need to start rethinking the way we do things. It's not right flying vegetables all across the world, and what I'd actually wanted to say is that, rather than you being in conflict, is there a middle course that we should be hearing about.

RB: I'd like to add my two-penneth to that as well to see what the two speakers think. There was a lot of discussion about choices we face. You can either do reduction of carbon dioxide emissions or you can do renewable energy, or you can do some other programme. Why shouldn't we do all those things if we possibly can. If we can find a way of reducing carbon dioxide relatively economically we ought to be able to do renewables as well. Is that not the case? Then you get the double wammy, the double benefit.

MP: Do you want to go first?

BL: I've gone first all the time.

MP: I think there are some things we have got in common. We're both positive. We don't necessarily subscribe to the – I think it was Fraser on Dad's Army wasn't it who said "We're doomed". But one of the key differences I think between Bjorn's approach and mine I would suggest is that he says "there are solutions so let's not worry about it. We can do it in time. There's plenty of time. Climate change is not

urgent". All the scientific evidence – pretty much all the scientific evidence – disputes that. My approach is "There are solutions so let's get on with it".

RB: But don't you need to do both? You need to reduce the carbon emissions and you need to do the renewables and then you can do something quite significant. Why have this alternative choice – you either do that one or that one?

MP: Yes we need to get things in the right order and that McKinsey cost curve is a really useful tool in that sense because it shows what our priorities should be. We shouldn't necessarily just go straight for photovoltaics because we can achieve much bigger carbon savings at negative cost by tackling all the things at the left hand end of the cost curve first and, working through that, we can then come on to renewables. But there are situations in which even some of the things at the very expensive end of that cost curve – like photovoltaic panels – can make economic sense. For instance, if you are working on an office scheme and the client says they want it to have polished granite on the façade. Well polished granite costs about £700 per square meter. PV costs about £550 so they're cheaper. So you could say to your client "OK, you're a progressive company and we think the right image for your building is for it to be covered in photovoltaic panels". You could offset all the capital costs as being just about creating the right image for the building and then everything you get from then on is a bonus. So, the economics of this are not as straightforward or as black and white as Bjorn suggests.

RB: Have you tried to find some common ground? Have you found any common ground? (*Turning to BL*)

BL: Yeah - first of all – I think there some points. I love the example of granite versus PV's but that's exactly the point of saying "When does it pay?" then of course we should do. Err, the problem I have and that most economists have with the McKinsey study, and again this is a bit picky, the exact examples you would like because all economists and peer-reviewed economists – and again the McKinsey report has been endlessly quoted but it's not peer-reviewed – it tells us that there are all these free lunches. And the questions all professional economists ask themselves is "So, why aren't they being eaten?" We should be done with that. If it is actually in everybody's interests to do it with the current regulations, it should be done. So, great let's not talk about it and then of course it won't happen. The point is that all that hasn't happened is not happening because it's actually hard. And that's the problem. That's why it actually costs money and I'm sorry you may quote McKinsey endlessly, and you probably will, but the main problem here is that even the EU acknowledges that it's not old numbers that I come up with. Even the EU acknowledges that, there's, their data – it's going to cost a lot of money. That it's going to cost about 60 billion Euros a year to do virtually nothing.

But let me just, two other points

The solutions – let's do them – err no, not if they're not cost effective – let's develop them till they're actually cost effective. Imagine the computers back in the 1940's. Imagine if someone had said "Hey, we've got computers. Let's give everyone a laptop in 1950". Err, no, let's develop the computers so that it actually becomes developable, and actually becomes marketable by 1976 – that's a great idea.

And the last bit – the either or. I love the thing "shouldn't we do both?" Well shouldn't we do everything? No, exactly not, because at the end of the day if we are going to spend a billion dollars on research and development which does \$16 worth of good that cuts a lot of carbon in the long run, and spend a billion dollars on doing 4 pence worth of good, I would rather much spend both of that billion, both 2 billions, on research and development. Then you would say, well shouldn't we do 2 billion on r&d, and 2 billion on cutting carbon emissions. No, then we should spend 4 billion on r&d.

The point still remains, it's not a good argument to say "I have a great idea, I have a bad idea, let's do both." Hey, it's like saying let them eat cake, no let them eat both bread and cake.

RB: Ok, this isn't a revolution fortunately. Um, let's leave the statistics for the bar, and have some more points in, from the audience. There must be loads. I'm sure you're gagging to have a go at this. There is one over there.

Question / comment: Just a way of bringing this into line with the things we were speaking about earlier on, and the launch of the new BCO guide. Um, in terms of what we can do in the office building sector, in the guides section about these issues or about the reuse of existing buildings, and 15% of a carbon footprint of a building in its life cycle is in its construction. 90 % of the buildings we use are over 10 years old, and we are redeveloping buildings at the rate of 1% per year at the moment. So things that we are doing in new buildings are benefiting 1% of the buildings we are using to work in and things that we can do to improve the situation for existing buildings, by reusing, potentially have a much much greater effect in the long term.

RB: That is a point that I'm sure most of us agree on. But let's keep going, we've got 2 or 3 minutes left and then we are at 5:30 and we will stop. Any more?

Question / comment (abbreviated): The issue of deaths I thought was very interesting, and Bjorn, quoted a statistic, in which there was 1.4 million fewer deaths in a warmer world than currently, is the number on a global basis. I don't think we should look at deaths on a global basis, some people are able to look after themselves in our world, and some aren't, I think we should focus on those who relatively aren't. For the sake of the argument today, Africa and the Himalayan area, which seem to be people in general who are less able than Europe and the US for example. My understanding is that Africa is seriously going to suffer more deaths over its life for the next 50 years as a result of global warming. And I would be interested in your comments on that. Um, the other issue, in terms of our offices. We are unable to forecast the future price of energy. All the forecasts I see show that energy is going to rise considerably faster than construction costs in the next 20-50 years. On that basis, does it not radically change the equation of how we should be considering the capital cost of our buildings in terms of driving energy efficiency?

RB: Ok, I'm going to take another question, but this is probably the last one. And then try to get you guys to answer. There was another question over here.

Question / comment (abbreviated): Glenn Blake Thomas from AET. I've heard somebody else speak a little while ago about the principles when BCO was presenting best practice guide and so on. The sustainability issues were simply to use less stuff, and it seems to me that there isn't anywhere near enough of that thinking going on around the world.

RB: I think innovation in the recession might sort out a few new ideas. Could you both summarize the last couple points that have been made, and then we will call it a day because it's already 5:32.

MWP: OK, Well I agree with you about using less stuff and I think that one of the problems with the carbon age is that it's just been so easy to burn fossil fuels, and to use resources for whatever we need, and we have kind of lost the ability to be really ingenious. And I think, one of the really exciting things about the age we are entering is that we are going to see a really massive re-awakening of ingenuity, that's going to be much more highly valued.

Then the point about energy forecast which I guess touches on the whole subject of peak oil. Well actually, I agree, I think that is a really significant issue and the US department of energy wrote a report

quite a while ago now, concluding that failure to plan at least 10 years in advance for peak oil could lead to social and economic problems that would be unprecedented. So, the quicker we get onto this, and really tackle our addiction to fossil fuel and move towards a low carbon economy, the better. There is no time for delay.

RB: Good, nice positive point.

BL: With respect to the more people, ah it's perhaps important to realize that 97% of the world does not actually get more populated. Everybody moves to cities, so you are absolutely right. More people are going to be living in the cities because everybody loves to do so. But it's not that we are running out of space, or indeed running out of building materials in that sense. And I would argue that, we also have to remember, that for most people it's an incredible increase in life quality that we've actually doubled or more the square footage that we have per person in most of the western world, and probably most of the developed worlds, although we don't have the numbers. So again, I would say, we have to be careful, a little bit like the lady pointed out before, that we don't focus so much on this one problem that we forget presumably it's about making better life quality for people and actually making a better world.

Ah, with respect to the Africa question. As I very briefly mentioned, it is actually true that Africa will see more heat deaths versus cold deaths, its 250,000 deaths versus 200,000 so it's not very much, but if you include China, if you include Latin America, ah that is all the developing world, you actually have the same pattern. You still have that we have more avoided cold deaths, sorry um, more extra heat, no, fewer extra heat, sorry, no, fewer extra heat deaths versus more cold deaths. But, it's bad, I can't, I'm sorry, I can't figure that number out. But the main point of course still remains, even if it wasn't so, the question is what could you do for the average African? Would you really want to help that person through cutting carbon emissions, or through those incredibly simple things that could be done right now that would probably help them a lot more?

So, at the end of the day, we probably also disagree on (*gestures toward MP*) peak oil, but I think that we can agree that we should do an enormous amount of stuff that's smart, we should do all the smart stuff, but we shouldn't do fashionable stuff just simply because it makes us feel good. And we have to remember, carbon dioxide and global warming is not our only challenge to make this a better world.

RB: Ok, time to conclude. I think it's very obvious that this is a complex debate, the only point I would say to conclude in a way is that of course, what we do in our UK property market, is no longer just a matter for the UK because we are affecting something global. The climate is changing globally partly because of what we are doing, so we can't just pretend we are in our own little box, and work on our own solutions.