
Climate Change 101 for Landmen and Lawyers: Uninhabitable Earth or False Alarm? (Part 4)

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This is a continuation of a five part series reviewing *False Alarm, How Climate Panic Costs us Trillions, Hurts the Poor, and Fails to Fix the Planet*, by Bjorn Lomborg.

THE PARIS CLIMATE ACCORD

In his book, *False Alarm*, Lomborg harshly criticizes the 2015 Paris Climate Accord. First, he makes the point that the 2°C target for limiting postindustrial emissions in the Paris Agreement was not set by scientists, but by politicians. The UN science reports, says Lomborg, never established 2°C as the tipping point where climate change becomes irreversible and disaster ensues. This is “not what science tells us,” says Lomborg, “it is what politics tells us.”

Next, Lomborg correctly points out that the 2015 Paris Agreement, like the 1997 Kyoto and 1992 Rio de Janeiro accords before it, has failed in its goal of arresting the increase of CO₂ emissions worldwide. This is primarily due to increases in fossil fuel usage and, most notably, increases in coal-fired power plants in India, China, and other parts of the developing world. Even left-leaning Germany has recently announced that it will be constructing a new coal-fired power plant after overreliance on wind and solar power has caused German consumer electricity rates to skyrocket.

It is ironic that the US, despite the Trump administration's now-rescinded withdrawal from the Paris Accord, is one of the few of the almost 200 signatories to the agreement meeting its Paris Accord commitments. This is due largely to the conversion of so many coal-fired power plants in the US to natural gas, in spite of fierce opposition to fracking by many environmentalists.

Lomborg's basic criticism of the Paris Climate Agreement is that, even if its signatories undertook all the carbon emission cuts they have agreed to so far, according to the only report the UN has released on the Paris Agreement's costs, in a best-case scenario it will cause temperatures only about 0.05°F lower by the end of the 21st century than what they would otherwise be. And this is achieved at costs to the economy, which by that time could exceed \$2 trillion annually. Lomborg then calculates the cost benefits of the Paris Agreement to be 11 cents for every dollar spent. “It's simply a bad deal for the world,” he says.

So where do the \$1 in costs for every 11 cents in benefits calculated by Lomborg originate? Mostly, says Lomborg, from governmental subsidies in transitioning to wind and solar, carbon taxes, and lost growth, which today is costing the world about \$400 billion annually and is on the rise. Of these three, lost growth is what primarily concerns Lomborg. The losses in growth spawned by the Paris Accord, says Lomborg, will fall disproportionately on poorer countries who will be asked to abandon cheaper fossil fuels for less reliable wind and solar energy at a time when they are in most need of fossil fuels to lift their populations out of poverty.

Lomborg's calculations are admittedly above my head. But I note he apparently includes carbon taxes in the costs though he himself is proposing them. On the other hand, his point about wind and solar subsidies is easy to understand. As Warren Buffet famously said in 2014 when being asked about his investments in wind turbines in Iowa, "We get a tax credit if we build a lot of wind farms. That's the only reason to build them." Energy writer Robert Bryce recently reported in *Forbes* that Buffet's wind energy company, Mid America, expects to collect a whopping \$10 billion in tax credits for spending \$12.9 billion on wind projects in Iowa.

Whether or not you accept Lomborg's calculations of the costs and benefits of the Paris Accord, it beggars belief for some climate activists (and politicians) to say that transitioning the world from fossil fuels to wind and solar over the next couple of decades will be cost neutral or cheap. Lomborg points out that the Yellow Vest movement in progressive France, which organized massive government protests against a 13-cent rise in gasoline tax, might be a harbinger of what could happen in the US if policies are adapted that dramatically raise the price of gasoline or consumer electricity bills.

Irrespective, President Biden recommitted the United States to the Paris Agreement by executive order on his first day in office. The Biden administration believes an American commitment to the Paris Accord is highly symbolic and can foster further international dialogue and progress against climate change. Even the Russians now have a seat at the table in discussing the Paris Accord following their 2019 ratification. Whether US consumers (and voters) will tolerate the higher energy costs eventually fostered by the Paris Accord, both at the pump and in their utility bills, remains to be seen.

CRITICS, ROUND ONE

Books that challenge climate change orthodoxy are bound to have critics, and *False Alarm* is no exception. Two negative reviews stand out. The first was a review of *False Alarm* appearing in the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, written by Robert ("Bob") Ward, Policy and Communications Director of the Grantham Research Institute, London School of Economics. Ward says that both Shellenberger in *Apocalypse Never* and Lomborg in *False Alarm* "rely on sources that are outdated, cherry-picked or just wrong." Ward, a geologist, also believes

that William Nordhaus, the 2018 Winner of a Nobel Prize for his work on climate change economics, advanced conclusions that omitted the biggest risks. Apparently, Ward thinks the Nobel Prize committee got it wrong with Nordhaus.

In a follow-up two-minute review of *False Alarm* appearing on YouTube, Ward calls Lomborg “daft” for concluding that the “optimal” level of global warming would be 3.75°C by 2100. Ward claims that the last time the earth was over 2°C warmer than in preindustrial times was during the Pliocene Epoch, which occurred million years before humans appeared on the planet. Ward then dismisses *False Alarm* as “political propaganda.”

The first problem with Ward’s criticism is that nowhere in *False Alarm* does Lomborg state that 3.75°C is an “optimal” level for an increase in global warming. (I am not the only person to make that observation about Ward’s YouTube video.) Lomborg’s reference to 3.75°C was for projecting economic damages wrought by global warming in an extreme case, using an economic model that, according to Lomborg, was developed by the US government and relied upon by UN scientists in their climate reports. Elsewhere in the book, Lomborg repeatedly talks about the need to prevent extremes in global temperatures by a carbon tax, innovation, adaptation, and growing prosperity.

A second problem with Ward’s review is his assertion that the last time the world experienced over 2°C of warming compared to preindustrial times was 3 million years ago during the Pliocene Epoch. He also asserts that humans, having only been around 250,000 years, have never experienced such high global temperatures.

But what about the interglacial warming periods that have occurred during the last 250,000 years? Recent research based on studies of Greenland ice accumulated during the interglacial period known as the Eemian would contradict Ward’s claim. According to Gregory Wrightstone, author of *Inconvenient Facts: The Science That Al Gore Doesn’t Want You to Know*, the Eemian Period, which was only 115,000 to 130,000 years ago, saw temperatures 8°C (14.4°F) warmer than they are today. Yet the Eemian Period is well within the 250,000-year time span of homo sapiens. In addition, according to Wrightstone, there have been multiple interglacial periods through the 250,000-year time span of human history in which temperatures were 2°C (3.6°F) higher than at the outset of the Industrial Revolution. Wrightstone, like Ward, is an accomplished geologist with decades of experience.

Furthermore, though homo sapiens has only been around 250,000 years, animals much like humans have been around 2.5 million years, and apes, from whom Darwin tells us humans evolved, have been around for another 55 million years, which was eons before the Pliocene Epoch referenced by Ward. However, this does not mean that modern humans, air-conditioning aside, might not be more challenged by warmer temperatures than earlier humans or apes. Nor does it discount the uncertainty of the impact that rising global

temperatures could have on modern humans since the world has not experienced such temperatures in a long while. This uncertainty and the existential threat that climate change poses for human survival, are acknowledged by Lomborg in *False Alarm*, though Ward implies otherwise, by saying that, “though [Lomborg] acknowledges the existence of climate change, he says there is nothing we can do about it.”

But are Ward and I reading the same book? Lomborg devotes almost a fourth of *False Alarm* to a section titled “How to Fix Climate Change.” That Ward may not agree with or discount Lomborg’s solutions does not mean that Lomborg did not suggest them. That Ward, a trained geologist, neglects to mention the Eemian and other more recent periods of interglacial warming as compared to the Pliocene Epoch—especially after calling Lomborg “daft”—is revealing.

Speaking of geologic time, a more cogent point, though Ward did not make it, is that concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere are today a little above 400 points per million (ppm), or about 0.04% of the atmosphere. This is the highest level of CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere, according to Wrightstone, in about 320,000 years. It is also, acknowledges Wrightstone, about 120 ppm higher than in the year 1750 when the Industrial Revolution began. This has provided the impetus behind the 350.org movement started by well-known environmentalist Bill McKibben, which is to get atmospheric concentrations back to 350 ppm through abandonment of fossil fuels as soon as possible.

But what is more important, arresting rising temperatures or getting CO₂ concentrations halfway back to preindustrial levels? Obviously, higher global temperatures and CO₂ levels are intertwined. The difference is that higher CO₂ levels are good for plant life, and as Wrightstone points out, throughout most of the earth’s history, CO₂ has been at levels higher than it is today. Higher temperatures are more problematic, having fewer benefits and exposing humans to higher risks. (Though not always – as Lomborg reminds, a lot more people die globally from cold each year than heat.) But higher temperatures can also be adapted to by humans through technologic innovations, such as making air conditioning more efficient, portable and affordable for masses of people in the underdeveloped world and elsewhere.

In deference to Ward, an accomplished geologist employed by one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world, a short magazine review and a follow-up two-minute YouTube video have obvious limitations when dealing with a subject as complicated as climate change. But Ward’s diatribe against Lomborg on YouTube is an example of how quick many environmental activists, media outlets, and politicians are to dismiss anyone who expresses disagreement with them on climate change. In their view, to question prevailing climate change orthodoxy makes the questioner *ipso facto* opposed to science, if not an outright Luddite. Furthermore, since their views reflect “scientific consensus,” they

are unimpeachable. Skeptics must be either dumb or unduly swayed by propaganda spewed by oil companies and their paid hirelings in conservative media and elsewhere.

But since when is “scientific consensus” a touchstone for truth? In Galileo’s time, there was a scientific consensus that the world was flat, leading to his persecution as a heretic. Scientific truth is correct, incorrect, or unknown. Consensus has little to do with it.

In the instance of climate change, many of its long-term impacts, how humans will respond, and what new technological innovations may arise to help fight are simply unknowable at the present. So should we make extreme assumptions about the dangers of climate change, plan for the worst, overspend on wind and solar power, and underspend on the many other opportunities to improve life over the course of this century for the billions of people living in poverty, plus everyone else? Lomborg would say no. As he puts it, “That’s not just inefficient. It’s morally wrong.”

Next time, Part V of V: CRITICS, ROUND TWO, AND CONCLUSION.