

# Climate Change Politics in Australia: The Lomborg Factor

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*Eager to cut, savage and wind back constructive projects in the realm of medicine, science and education, Australia's government has made its latest head-shaking announcement on budgetary issues. The veteran climate change sceptic Bjørn Lomborg is going to become the recipient of \$4 million in Australian tax payers' money. According to a spokesman for education minister, Christopher Pyne, the government was going to be providing the money over four years to "bring the Copenhagen Consensus methodology to Australia" houses at newly established centre at the University of Western Australia.*

While Pyne and company have given the impression that university staff were briefed on the move, many have demurred from that account. The university's vice-chancellor, among a few others, seemed to be the only ones kept in the loop about the move. Instead of seeing how well used such money would be, Prof Paul Johnson could only reduce it to general terms, claiming that "it is difficult to get federal dollars to flow across the Nullabor." Anything will do.

The baffling nature of this funding move is to be contrasted by the diminished standing Lomborg has in his native Denmark, whose government defunded the centre in 2012. This ended eight years of regular supply. Showing how antiquated and disregarded centres have their populist purpose, the climate denialists in the Abbott government have decided to give the finger to science in favour of the Lomborg "consensus", which is its own form of contrarian dogma.

To date, Lomborg's donors have preferred to be anonymous and private. He has admitted to receiving moneys from the Kaufman Foundation, New Ventures Foundation, the Rush Foundation and the Randolph Foundation.[1] His outfit involves seven full time employees dedicated to commissioning "all the smart economists from around the world to write the papers that actually estimate what are the costs and benefits [of climate change policies]." Science remains the unfortunate orphan in this project, while economics is the privileged child of the endeavour.

This is not to say that Lomborg is an absolutist on denying climate change. He eschews hysteria about an ending world, disappearing cities, the calamitous results of environmental upheaval. Having read an interview with economist Julian Simon in Wired Magazine in 1997, one claiming that the naysayers and doomsdayer types were wrong in presuming that things were getting worse, Lomborg commenced his work on *The Sceptical Environmentalist*. "Yes, global warming is real, it is a challenge, but the typical way we solve it turns out to be a pretty poor investment of resources."

In 2001, when the book came out, it produced a range of positive reviews from *The Economist*, *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. But while being critical about the apocalyptic alarmism of various climate change lobbies, including rates of deforestation and species extinction, he provided a recipe for splendid policy inertia. Climate change denialists flocked to him and feted the academic from Aarhus. They did not have to wait too long for Lomborg's follow up work, *Cool It*.

The critics found examples of statistical distortion, misuse of data and traditional cherry picking. While his targets are supposedly the alarmists, he, in turn, is the master of environmental understatement, adding colours of optimism to a world otherwise doomed. He remains, at heart, an efficiency maximiser in the economic tradition, not a sound environmental don.

Since then, he continues to pour water – he has ample amounts of it – over arguments about catastrophic upheaval. He cites studies showing “a decrease in the world’s surface that has been afflicted by droughts since 1982.”[2] The costs of some natural disasters has increased because of population growth and proximity of humans to the danger zones. Are people in poor states at greater risk to climate change results or basic indigence? According to Lomborg, “if we want to help the poor people who are most threatened by natural disasters, we have to recognise that it is less about cutting carbon emissions than it is about pulling them out of poverty” (*Wall Street Journal*, Feb 1).

In March, Lomborg found himself helping the Australian government to launch the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s development innovation hub. To show how he has become a weapon in the climate change wars, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop would claim that he was “a leading economist and a creative thinker and will add to the international input for our exciting new innovation initiative for the delivery of aid.” But the opening of the hub seemed somewhat absurd in the context of foreign aid as a policy – after all, its levels have been, in the words of foreign affairs spokeswoman for Labor, Tanya Plibersek, the “weakest” and “most-depleted... in Australian history”.[3]

For all his focus on cost-effective expenditure, his centre has become part of an even poorer investment of resources, allied as they are to government subsidies in non-renewable, and polluting sources. Where Lomborg and Abbott government see eye to eye is the veneration they afford fossil fuels, notably cheap fossil fuels. Dirty coal, for Abbott, is mighty and sovereign; for Lomborg, making such fuels accessible to the developing world is fundamental. This constitutes a polluter’s charter.

According to opposition environment spokesperson Mark Butler, a cash-strapped Abbott government was proving all too willing to part with the goods when it came to Lomborg. “Tony Abbott has found millions of taxpayers’ dollars to fund his attack on renewable energy while at the same time gutting Australia’s science and university funding... [he] has deputised one of the world’s most well-known renewable energy sceptics to continue his climate change denial and attacks on renewable energy” (*The Australian*, Apr. 17).

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#### Notes:

[1] <http://freakonomics.com/2014/10/02/108967/>

[2] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/bjorn-lomborg-the-alarming-thing-about-climate-alarmism--1422832462>

[3] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/critics-concerned-as--government-invites-climate-policy-sceptic-bjorn-lomborg-to-address-aid-staff-20150322-1m4tor.html>

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