

The Bjorn supremacy – is Australia getting the climate advice it deserves?

Written by The Conversation

As tabloid news outlets [invite us](#) to feast on the “craziest” and most “insane” images of the Sydney storms this week from social media, University of Western Australia vice-chancellor Paul Johnson has called for calm over Bjorn Lomborg’s appointment to be his fellow [advisory board co-chair](#) of a new “Australia Consensus Centre” at UWA. Lomborg will play a key role at the centre.

What has been revealed about the centre is that it will be substantially [modelled](#) on Lomborg’s controversial Copenhagen Consensus Center (CCC) – which is, oddly, based in the US. The CCC is ostensibly a policy thinktank that uses economic modelling to trivialise the importance of addressing climate change to reach long-term development goals.

The CCC does not disclose its donors, and denies receiving funding from fossil-fuel companies. But probing from [DeSmogBlog](#) in 2014 uncovered donations from organisations with [links to](#) the billionaire Koch brothers, who have [funnelled millions](#) to climate-denying thinktanks, and helped foil decarbonisation policy and action in the US.

The UWA centre will receive A\$4 million support from the federal government and is looking for A\$8 million more from other sources.

Lomborg’s particularly dangerous form of climate denial is to begrudgingly accept the science while producing economic models to say that global warming is really a minor issue. He is famous for using economic modelling as a mercenary gun for hire, saleable to governments and jurisdictions requiring climate inaction, climate distraction, or just straight-out climate crisis denial.

As such, one has to have some sympathy for Lomborg, who is a strange kind of “climate change refugee”. In 2012, the Danish government [pulled all funding](#) from his centre. Since, he has only set up shop in countries that have strong climate change-denying lobbies – both in the private sector and within mainstream media. He has enjoyed this in the US.

Lomborg operates by attaching himself to these centres as an adjunct professor, which will be

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his title at UWA, rather than a staff member. This offers the freedom to command remuneration well above a professorial salary – such as the US\$775,000 he was paid in 2012 [by the CCC](#) and the US\$200,484 paid for his work in 2013.

But Johnson believes Lomborg is good value. He [said](#) the centre:

... will become the go-to place for useful economic research to inform the national and international debate.

And on that score, Johnson [says](#) of Lomborg:

Contrarians are, I think, useful, particularly in a university context.

Universities, in a sense, live and die on the basis of rigorous discussion, thought and analysis, as long as that is conducted within the norms of academic discourse — it needs to be polite, rational and evidence-based.

But in taking the cash and not looking into the so-called ["Bjorn legacy"](#), Johnson has ignored the trail of [intellectual neglect](#) in Lomborg's work. It has even attracted a book, [The Lomborg Deception](#), that focuses solely on the lack of rigour in Lomborg's books *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001) and *Cool It* (2007).

The *Lomborg Deception's* author, Howard Friels, documented how footnote after footnote does not support anything that Lomborg says. In *Cool It*, Lomborg opens with a claim directly ignoring research by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature showing that polar bear numbers in the Arctic are in terminal decline. He is bold enough to suggest they are actually increasing.

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The problem is that Lomborg's sources consist of a blog and a study that nowhere mentions polar bears – not even the ones that are dead. Not much rigorous thought and analysis there.

The mere fact that Lomborg's franchise-style "consensus" centre is here is an indictment on the climate politics environment in Australia. The centre subverts the term "consensus", which is otherwise famous for the 97% of climate scientists who have verified the fact of global warming.

But, what is perhaps a new low for Australia is how the federal funding for Lomborg's centre was not even subject to a competitive process. Instead, it was through negotiations [personally held](#) between Lomborg and Education Minister Christopher Pyne.

Lomborg's influence over key ministers in the Abbott government is quite well-known. He is seen to be at the centre of much of federal cabinet's climate [groupthink](#) .

Abbott's book *Battlelines* gives a handy summary of the appeal of Lomborg, who can add economic "science" to Abbott's mantra that we cannot afford to do anything about climate change if it is going to "lobber the economy":

It doesn't make sense ... to impose certain and substantial costs on the economy now in order to avoid unknown and perhaps even benign changes in the future. As Bjorn Lomborg has said: "...a narrow focus on reducing carbon emissions could leave future generations with major costs, without major cuts to temperatures."

Before the Abbott government was elected in 2013, Greg Hunt [revealed](#) that Lomborg's "modelling" was a centrepiece for the Coalition's Direct Action policy. In December 2014, Lomborg was [briefing Andrew Robb](#) on how "trade can eliminate poverty".

Last month, Julie Bishop invited Lomborg to become one of her department's [advisers on aid](#)

[development](#)

. He

has also written an occasional column for The Australian, which reads like an energy policy whiteboard for Hunt.

But the rancour this week coming from UWA students and staff over the funding of the Australia Consensus Centre was overshadowed by the Sydney super-storm, which rapidly escalated from a “once-in-a-decade” to a “once-in-a-century” storm. This discourse assumes the stability of a bygone Holocene and neglects that human beings are changing the earth’s climate at a rate faster than any geological epoch.

Perhaps Lomborg’s centre might want to do some economic modelling of the cost of this storm. It is estimated that it will cost many millions of dollars. [7100 insurance claims](#) have been made already.

The modelling would need to consider projections about the global warming-induced size and frequency of storms in the future considering that eight of the most costly extreme weather disasters have all occurred in last 16 years. This is precisely during the time when climate deniers say there has been a “pause” in global warming.

At a cost of more than A\$14 billion so far, the Sydney hailstorm in 1999, the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009, the Hunter Valley storms in 2007, the Perth and Melbourne hailstorms both in 2010, the Queensland floods in 2010-11, Cyclone Yasi in 2011 and the Sydney fires in October 2013 certainly could do with some risk analysis.

But the problem here is that you would actually need to listen to climate scientists to have any hope of assessing the rate of increase and intensity of such events, and how the climate dice can quickly send a sceptic into policy bankruptcy.

The real travesty of funding Lomborg’s newest franchise is that it comes from the same government that defunded the Climate Commission. This was composed of Australia’s best climate scientists, economists and energy experts, with an operating cost of A\$1.5 million per year. This, more than even the most horrendous of storms, really exposes the parlous state of the Abbott government’s desertion of future generations.

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