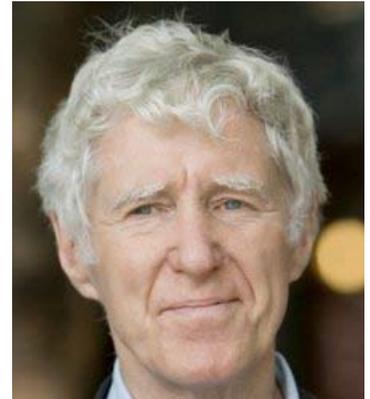


‘We’re really on the edge of some fundamental changes...’

An interview with Lester Brown, President, Earth Policy Institute

Lester Brown is the well-renowned author of the Plan B series and recent book World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse. His distinguished career, spanning agricultural policy, international development and environmental analysis, has seen him found two major environmental research institutes – the WorldWatch Institute in 1974 and the Earth Policy Institute in 2001 – and author or co-author 50 books. He is currently the President of the Earth Policy Institute based in Washington D.C.



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Interviewer: John Wiseman

John Wiseman: If you had just a few sentences to summarise the key messages you most wanted to get across in writing *Plan B* and *World on the Edge*, what would you say?

Lester Brown: The two biggest challenges, I think, that the world faces right now are the need to stabilise the climate and to stabilise population. Neither of these are easy but we’re well on our way to stabilising population. There are now 46 countries that have, essentially, zero population growth and a large part of Asia that is China, along with Korea, and Japan’s already stabilised its population. China’s going to be there in a matter of years so that’s a big chunk of the world. Then Europe, Western and Eastern Europe, have already stabilised their populations.

North America is moving in the right direction. Latin America is doing surprisingly well. Brazil’s population is projected to grow by 12% between now and 2050, only 12% which means they’re getting the brakes on pretty nicely, too. So the two big areas we have to concentrate on now are the Indian subcontinent, which has a total of 1.6 billion people. That’s India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and so forth, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Those are the two big population growth areas. They are also the two areas where most of the poverty is concentrated so we need to really concentrate on getting the brakes on population growth in those two regions of the world.

If we can do that, and it’s a combination of, of course, making sure reproductive healthcare and family planning services are available but it’s also education, making sure that children everywhere get at least an elementary school education, girls as well as boys. Then, we can begin to bring the birth rate down in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Then, we’ll be on the way home.

JW: And in relation to climate?

LB: Climate is a much more difficult issue. In contrast to population where 46 countries have already stabilised populations, there aren't too many countries that have stabilised carbon emissions yet so that's really a global challenge for us.

The good news is that in the United States, carbon emissions are starting to drop and I think are going to continue to drop very substantially during this decade.

The two big sources of carbon emissions in the US, as in most of the world, are coal and oil. We have, currently, 492 coal-fired power plants in the United States. Of those, 109 are scheduled to close within, if not this year, next year or very soon and there are more coming. We have a national campaign now that's led by the Sierra Club called the Beyond Coal Campaign and the goal is to close every coal-fired power plant in the United States. Sierra's working with many local groups, health groups, environmental groups, hundreds and hundreds of them across the country to close these plants. Mayor Bloomberg of New York in July of last year gave the Sierra Club Beyond Coal Campaign \$50 million. This is important, not just because it's \$50 million, although that, obviously, is important in and of itself, but it's because Michael Bloomberg, one of the most successful businessmen of his generation, almost a household name, is the one who's fuelling this effort. So I'm very optimistic on closing coal-fired power plants.

Now, with gasoline use, we have a number of trends coming together, some economic, some social, some political. One is that the US automobile fleet has started to shrink. In 2008, it was 248 million. 2009, it dropped to 246 million, 2010, to 242 million. That's the last year for which we have complete data but I think it continued in 2011 and is going to continue in 2012. So in the United States, the growth of the automobile fleet's been underway for a century now, is starting to decline.

Beyond that, the fuel efficiency of cars is increasing very fast in the US and this is partly because of the goals created by President Obama. When he was bailing out Detroit a couple of years ago, he got some commitments from them and one was to double the fuel efficiency of new cars sold by 2025 or, stated otherwise, new cars sold in this country in 2025 will use only half as much gasoline as those sold in 2010. So in 15 years, we're cutting fuel use per car in half.

Beyond that, there's now a cultural shift occurring in this country with young people. They are not part of the car culture in the way that my generation was and we, particularly growing up in a rural community, the car was how we socialised. When you're 17 you've got a driver's licence and you've got a car, or a pick-up truck, something you could drive, and that's how you got around and got to see your friends in a rural community.

Today, we're a largely urban society and so young people aren't part of the car culture in the way that we were. There's a real shift going on. They live in cities, most of them, and they use public transportation, they use bicycles. The Bike-Share Program, if you look at the people on these bikes, they're between 20 and 40. They're not between 60 and 80. No, it's young people who are really taking to bikes and seeing them as their transport mode. So the combination of bikes and public transportation is where young people are today.

Two generations ago, the dream was to have a house in the suburbs and a car and so forth. That dream doesn't exist anymore for young people. They're not going to the suburbs. They don't really want anything to do with the suburbs. They want to live in town.

JW: You've described some extremely optimistic indicators around energy efficiency and the shift from fossil fuel to renewable energy. If I was to ask you the biggest obstacles - the one or two biggest roadblocks in relation to solving the climate challenge, how would you describe them?

LB: It would be the vested interests of big oil, and big coal and the influence they have, particularly in the Republican Party. They put a lot of money in political campaigns and now there are no limits on what they can put in so they're just buying everything in sight.

Nonetheless, the trends are pretty clear and the gains in fuel efficiency, the cultural shift in young people regarding cars, is happening and it's very difficult for them to alter that.

I saw an article about NASCAR recently...you know, automobile racing, car racing, and they've suddenly begun to panic because young people aren't going to the races and so they're seeing a shrinking audience. It's an interesting question because I don't think NASCAR's going to last forever. Years, maybe, but not forever because the idea of having a powerful car with a lot of horsepower under the hood, it's just not where young people are today. So these cultural shifts are more difficult to measure, usually, than economic shifts and they're more difficult to anticipate as well but we're clearly seeing a cultural shift and young people in this country are not, most of them, not part of the car culture.

JW: So do you feel, therefore, that the cultural shifts that you've talked about are sufficient to overcome the vested interest roadblocks that you've mentioned?

LB: They are. The automobile industry, behind the scenes, do things... to prevent heavy investment in public transportation...they insist that we need to repair the roads and not build new transit facilities, so they're behind the scenes and they're doing things but the tide is pretty strong and it's clear.

JW: Which leads me to a question about urgency. Many people will say that, yes, there are many good things happening in relation to energy efficiency and renewable energy, but we also know how quickly greenhouse gas emissions are rising and what the science tells us about the global temperature changes locked in and so on. When people say to you, "that's all good ...but it's too late" what do you say to them?

LB: When we use the term "Is it too late," we have to say, "Is it too late for what?" Is it too late to prevent climate change from spiralling out of control? I don't think anyone knows. We have to hope it's not and then act accordingly with the urgency that that implies.

We're seeing evidence now, almost every day, that the climate system is changing and this is obviously affecting the food prospects because agriculture, as it exists today, evolved over an 11,000 year period of rather remarkable climate stability. I mean, there were a few blips here and there and a mini ice age in the 13th century, but basically 11,000 years of pretty stable climate. So agriculture systems are designed to maximise production with that climate system but that climate system is now changing so with each passing year, the climate system and the agricultural system are more and more out of sync with each other and that is a very difficult thing to analyse and anticipate.

We know it's happening. It's inevitable and the question is can we get carbon emissions coming down soon enough to avert the worst consequences of climate change? We're not going to avert all of them. We're already experiencing them. I guess the question is, can we keep climate change from spiralling out of control? I don't know the answer to that question but we certainly have to try.

JW: Returning to the point you've made about energy efficiency and the transition from fossil fuels to renewables, how much do you also think that the third element in that transition that needs to change is a reduction in the aggregate growth of the consumption of goods and services? How important is that in the mix?

LB: Well, another interesting thing about the cultural shift is that the idea of acquiring property...starting with a small house and getting a bigger one and so forth, that acquisition of material things doesn't exist with young people in the way it did with an earlier generation; the generations that were shaped by the Depression and World War Two, for example.

There was a period when growth was everything and more material possessions was everything but I think we're beginning to leave that behind now. Values and attitudes are changing. The acquisition of material wealth is not something that looms very high in the minds of young people today. They don't want to be bothered with it.

JW: How much of that is true, do you think, outside of the developed world - in China, Korea and India, where there is still considerable poverty and - many people would say - considerable need to expand material consumption?

LB: Well, the interesting question is what these countries are facing. I mean, their desire is to be like us and so they're trying to adopt a 20th century economic model in the 21st century. Now, what if we sat back and said, "If you were designing an economy for the world today or some component like a transport system, if you were designing that for the 21st century, what would it look like and how would it be different from the one we've inherited from the 20th century?" The answer is it would be very different. If you were developing a new economy today, you'd have to take into account land scarcity, water scarcity, carbon emissions, a whole series of things that were not of particular importance in decades past but now they are.

So the question is how fast that rethinking will come. I remember doing a seminar for graduate students at Tsinghua University which is sometimes referred to as the MIT of China. It's located in Beijing, and we were talking about cars and the future and I said, "Well, you know, you're not going to be able to do what we did." One student said, "But that's our dream. That's what we want, we want to do that," and I said, "You know, in the United States, we have three cars for every four people. If you get three cars for every four people in China, you will have nine hundred million cars. If you get all the cars in the world today squeezed into one country, one third of one country because two thirds of China is uninhabitable," I said, "that will not be a dream. That will be a nightmare."

These are engineers, they should be thinking about how you design a transportation system for the 21st century, not how do you copy one that evolved during the 20th century. Forget the imitation. Be original. Be yourselves. Ask the relevant questions for today. Don't ask how could we do what they did in the last century. That's not where you want to be.

JW: I'm interested in your views about theories of change - how change happens. Can you talk a bit more about your view about the importance of cultural and social change as opposed to the importance of technological innovation?

LB: Well, Malcolm Gladwell pioneered the concept of social tipping points, of political tipping points, and the interesting thing about tipping points is almost by definition, they're difficult to anticipate, at least to anticipate accurately. Sometimes we don't even see them coming. I mean, who saw the Berlin Wall coming down, you know, until it actually went down or I look at the Arab Spring of 2010 and it changed the

government in almost every country in a large part of the Arab world and it happened in sort of several countries simultaneously.

These weren't sort of random events. They'd reached a kind of tipping point suddenly. Things began to change. Partly it's political, part of it is demographic; a lot of young people in the 15 to 30 age group. It's technological; they have the internet now so they can organise, they can exchange information. It changes the whole ballgame. It's not just a few adjustments here and there. It really fundamentally changes things.

We have an effort in Italy right now, led by a comedian, Beppe Grillo, to challenge the existing political structures, not of any particular party, just the traditional political structures, and they've begun running candidates for office just a week ago, two weeks ago. A 31-year old was elected Mayor of Palma, for example. They're running candidates for all the local elections and everything. I mean, it's amazing to see it happen and we're going to see more of that.

We're really on the edge of some fundamental changes that we can't anticipate associated with the internet and information moving on the internet. It will override some of the traditional constraints of the systems but in ways that we cannot now easily imagine.

JW: So, given that, I'd like to ask you to put on your most optimistic hat and imagine we are sitting here in 2030 and we are discussing a world in which a really serious shift has begun towards the kind of changes which would have a real chance of preventing runaway climate change. Bearing in mind your point about how unpredictable the future can be, can you tell me how that change has occurred?

LB: Most of us don't like to change. I don't like to change and I'll go to great lengths to avoid changing sometimes but you reach these tipping points and then everything changes.

The United States before World War Two, if you'd conducted a poll on December 6th 1941, the day before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, and said, you know, "Should we go to war?" probably 90% would have said, "No, we don't want to get involved in another world war." If you'd conducted that poll on Monday, December 8th, probably 90% would have said, "Yes, we've got to go," and so it was just one event, that surprise attack. It was very successful from a military point of view on Pearl Harbour. I mean, the Japanese sunk half our Pacific fleet there in just one fell sweep but everything changed and we mobilised, we totally restructured the US industrial economy, not in decades, not in years but in a matter of months. Part of the key to that was banning the sale of automobiles.

President Roosevelt, early 1942, I think it was April 1st, and it wasn't April Fool's Day, I mean, it wasn't an April Fool's joke, he said, "We ought to ban the sale of automobiles in the United States." Then the car companies realised that they weren't going to be making cars for a long time; they were going to be making tanks and planes. It created an extraordinary military machine and turned the tide in the process.

So it's these tipping points that are difficult to anticipate but I think within the next five years, we're going to be surprised at how fast things have changed and how fast we have changed, whether it's in response to climate change and recognising the need to stabilise climate. I mean, up until now, climate change has mostly been someone else. You know, we see it on TV. It's a flood or a heatwave in Moscow but suddenly this past summer was sort of like that.

In this country, we started with a drought and then the wildfires in Texas and then flooding in the Mississippi and then Hurricane Irene and so forth; the tornado in Tuscaloosa and then in Joplin. I mean, it largely destroyed two middle-sized towns. I realised that the news channels were becoming weather channels. I'd

set aside on a Saturday afternoon, 1.30 to 3.00, to watch the world track and field championships in Korea on NBC. This was on a Saturday. I turned on NBC channel at 1.30 and I didn't get the track and field championships. I got Hurricane Irene. This is a major news network that had gone into around-the-clock coverage of the hurricane. It was a huge hurricane and it affected a lot of people on the East Coast. That, I think, is a sign of the times when news channels become weather channels and if you look at channels now and sort of think about it, they spend a lot more time on weather than they used to and people are interested in it. They're concerned about that.

JW: Although the challenge then becomes how to join the dots between the weather and climate. Do you think people are starting to join those dots?

LB: They are. I liken it to recognising the link between smoking and health 20 years ago and the tobacco company CEOs are under oath saying, "There's no proof of a link between smoking and health," and get away with it. Then, within a year or two, everything had changed and they couldn't say anything because no one would listen to them and no elected member of Congress would be seen in public with a tobacco company CEO. It just changed that fast. The Tobacco Institute used to be here in town, staffed by 300 people. Totally dismantled; forced to dismantle by NGOs and public opinion. I mean, it was amazing to see it happen. It happened very quickly...it had reached the tipping point and suddenly it was an entirely new ball game.

JW: Bearing in mind everything you've said about tipping points and given that at the end of the day tipping points are, by definition, to some extent, unpredictable, what's your view about the highest priorities for action by people who would like to ensure, that when the tipping points occur, that responses can be as effective as possible? What are the most important things to be doing at the moment?

LB: The question I get most often as I travel around the world is, people ask me, "What can I do, what can I do?" and I think they expect me to say, "Recycle your newspapers, change your light bulbs," and so on. Those lifestyle changes are important but we now have to change the system and that means becoming politically active, not for one party or another but to support the Beyond Coal campaign, for example. And be prepared to write letters to your Congressman to lobby, to demonstrate, you know, in front of a coal-fired power plant if necessary or in front of a utilities office. It can embarrass companies. There are banks in New York, investment banks, that if you threaten them with a demonstration, they'll almost certainly think twice about going ahead on something because whether it's Goldman Sachs or Bank of America or whoever, they don't want their image smirched.

Having demonstrations and people with signs walking around creates that image that something is wrong and for people to start thinking something is wrong with a bank is not healthy for the bank. So we see environmental groups getting investment banks to agree not to invest in coal or any company that supports the development of coal. These things can become important and the coal-mining companies can't raise capital as easily as they used to. No one wants to be associated with it. So those are the kinds of things that have happened and they happen quickly and they can have extraordinary consequences.

My bottom line feeling is things are going to change much faster than we realise and I think that change is probably more evident here in the United States right now where carbon emissions are dropping very fast as coal-fired power plants are closed and as gasoline use drops. Another interesting linkage between the two...42% of the diesel fuel used in the freight sector, rail freight sector, is used to move coal. If we're not moving coal anymore, suddenly the demand for diesel is going to drop markedly.

JW: I'm very interested in what you've been saying about the United States because, certainly in the Australian media and to some extent in Europe, the story is sometimes told that, "Well, look, you've got a congress that's controlled by very conservative forces, Tea Party Republicans and so on. There's no sign of Cap and Trade coming back...the United States is not in a leadership position." You're telling, to some extent, a different story there, at least about the level of cultural change and, indeed, the harder indicators of shifts in energy usage and so on.

LB: Yeah, and the interesting thing is it's happening because of a mix of things. If I were to pick the two most important things underway right now, one would be reducing gasoline use by cars, of new cars sold, by half, between 2010 and 2025. That's the US government-designed policy.

The other is the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign, closing coal-fired power plants. Now, there's some overlap because EPA issues, restrictions on mercury emissions from coal plants, what-have-you, that makes it more difficult for them to stay in business. So we have two major initiatives, one primarily government, the other primarily in the NGO sector.

JW: If you had a minute or two with the world's key decision-makers and you had two or three sentences in which you really wanted to convey very sharply, the most important priorities in relation to climate and ecological challenges, what would you say to them in two or three sentences?

LB: I'd say the biggest challenge we face is stabilising climate and that means closing coal-fired power plants, replacing the coal with wind and solar and geothermal energy.

The second big challenge we face is stabilising population and that's a challenge that's really concentrated in the Indian sub-continent and Sub-Saharan Africa and what we need to do there is to eradicate poverty, which we have the resources to do now, eradicate poverty and make sure that women everywhere have access to reproductive healthcare and family planning services.

JW: Thank you very much.