

Remarks of Paul Walker Bledsoe

Oxford Union Debate

May 5, 2016

Mr. Bledsoe Speaking in Opposition to the Motion:

“This House Believes the West has No Right to Impose Environmental Standards on Developing Countries”

Mr. President, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is only fitting that we meet here, in the heart of England, to discuss the momentous issue of climate change, because of course, this is where the problem began.

The industrial revolution that started here in the 1750s has transformed our world more than any other event in history, and has transformed it overwhelmingly, in my view, for the better.

Hundreds of millions then billions of people around the world have been lifted out of abject poverty and lives dominated by disease darkness and early death.

It is well not to romanticize the pre-industrial era (or underestimate poverty in our time), especially that of the average person. Hobbes summarized it accurately as life “nasty brutish and short.”

Extending the blessings of material comfort and the eradication of extreme poverty, hunger and disease must be a primary goal of our collective action. It is a profound moral obligation.

And yet, to accomplish this goal in a way that undermines the very stability of the natural world on which all depends, that threatens all the remarkable progress we have made by unleashing the unrelenting scourge of extreme climate change would be the ultimate fool's bargain, the existential nightmare of modern history, the self-inflicted calamity of all time.

We now stand on the precipice of such disaster as climate change impacts are right now becoming manifest around the world.

Without global action—which can only be effective if all major nations act—we risk runaway climate change which will in all likelihood be impossible to reverse. The undermining of agriculture production, extreme water shortages, ravaging storms, the displacements of hundreds of millions, killing heat waves, desertification—these are no longer theoretical threats they are instead almost certain to occur if we do not act. (A study just this week from the Max Planck Institute for Chemistry found that skyrocketing

temperatures in North Africa and the Middle East will make large parts of those regions 'uninhabitable' in just a few decades, with 5 fold increases in extremely high temperatures where heat will not drop below 30 degrees Celsius even at night.)

Fortunately, developing nations themselves are entirely aware of these dangers and have begun to take action often with urgency. China, which accounts for nearly 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions, is reducing coal use and utilizing renewable energy, while planning a national price on carbon, in part to address air pollution which shortens the lives of millions each year today. They recognize that the collective nature of climate change requires collective action. The problem simply cannot be addressed without action by all major emitters because developing countries emissions have surpassed those from the West for the last decade, and will account for even a larger majority in coming years.

India, the world's 4th largest emitter, has undertaken a stunningly ambitious effort under President Modi to deploy more than 170 GW of solar energy, a far more efficient means of electrifying the thousands of villages who lack power than the 19th century coal-fired spoke and hub system—this effort can help save millions of lives lost each year to extreme air pollution.

Even more India realizes that the undermining of the monsoons on which 700 million Indians who live by subsistence agriculture depend is the ultimate threat to their remarkable, ancient society. People in developing nations around world are deeply concerned about dozens of destabilizing climate impacts, and have come to the conclusion they too must act. As Tony la Vina, a climate delegate from the Philippines, has said echoing many others: "we're going to take on commitments and do our part.....how can we call on developed countries to reduce their emissions, and not reduce own?"

The question then is not will developing countries act – they are already acting in their own self-defense. The question is will we in the West have the wisdom to help the developing countries and save ourselves in the process.

There are signs we now finally see the centrality of this action. 20 major nations including the UK and US have committed to double spending on clean energy technology breakthroughs like electricity storage that can revolutionize energy production, allowing us to move toward the far lower levels of emissions—roughly 80% lower by mid-century—which the undeniable science of climate change demands if we are to avoid catastrophic tipping points causing cascading, runaway climate impacts.

Under the Paris climate agreement the West has pledged \$100 billion a year to provide clean energy technology in the developing world.

But I emphasize that the West must commit to an even greater crash program of providing existing and new technology both to cut burgeoning emissions from fast growing nations and to reduce energy poverty. We must also cut then eliminate other greenhouse emissions including hydrofluorocarbons, methane and black carbon soot that together account for

nearly 40% of warming but can stave off a temperature tipping points more quickly than any other action.

Meanwhile the West must reduce our emissions far faster and more deeply than we ask developing nations to do. This is precisely what the Paris Agreement set out, even as we acknowledge its ambition must be increased dramatically in the years to come. Thus, to support the motion before this House is to oppose the Paris Agreement itself, our best chance to collectively address climate change.

The issue of poverty alleviation vs. climate protection is a false choice, a red herring posed by climate deniers and defeatists. We can and we must do both; and in fact cannot address poverty effectively unless we protect the climate. A report by the World Bank released yesterday finds that water scarcity fueled by climate change will reduce GDP in the Middle East and North Africa by up to 6% in the next 35 years without action to prevent greater warming.

Fortunately, after 270 years we have learned a thing or two about energy and do not have to supply electricity as we did in the 18th century.

New data from the World Bank finds that in almost every market in the world total cost of wind and solar is lower today than coal or natural gas. The problem of fossil fuels is not the lack of substitutes, or high costs of those alternatives, but fundamentally the lack of will and the problem of inertia. We have fossil infrastructure already in place and many strong interests will defend it. And we must recognize that a transition will be needed during in which technology such as carbon capture and storage will likely play a pivotal role.

But we must make this transition now.

Yes the provision of energy is a key to poverty alleviation and we must provide it to help the world's poor.

But to do so in a way that undermines the very natural world on which all depends is not just self-defeating, it is the definition of insanity and indeed nihilism. It is apocalyptic. Such irresponsibility reminds me more than anything else of recent trends in America's Republican Party—that ignominious redoubt of climate denial. (I myself do not belong to an organized party—I'm a Democrat)

The scourge of climate change in the Anthropocene era—our era, created by ourselves—will bring unimaginable suffering to hundreds of millions and indeed billions, if we do not act. Fortunately, we have the means to save ourselves if act together, developed and developing nations.

We must not fail. Far too much, the fate of far too many, especially the world's poorest, hangs in the balance. We must not fail. We cannot. We will not.

We will fight the scourge of climate change as a sacred battle. Not—for once—against each other—but gloriously together, for the sake of us all.

To save ourselves and our progeny, to help the young, and the world's poorest, to save our very happiness and common destiny, to save:

This earth of majesty ...
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by nature for herself ...
This little world ...
This blessed plot, this earth.

Thank you.