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Dr Liam Fox speaks at the Climate & Freedom Symposium 2021 - COP26

Firefox

Monday, 8 November, 2021

For those of us who cut our political teeth in the Thatcher/Reagan era, today's politics can be disorientating.

Instead of the cool application of reason based on the logical development of ideas, themselves derived from sound basic principles, it seems that we have now stumbled into a political environment that is almost anti-enlightenment in nature.

In this twilight zone, the validity of someone's view is not determined by any relationship to empiricism but to the strength by which their view is held, often multiplied in the echo chamber of social media. Here, such nonsenses as "this is my truth, you have yours" takes us back to a darker era when evidence did not matter – only opinion.

It forgets that, ultimately, it didn't matter that 99% believed that the world was flat – it wasn't – and ultimately objective truth prevailed.

In our current political discourse, the so-called "progressives" (in a truly Orwellian twist) want us to regress to the failed collectivist policies of the past or, worse, to a "de growth agenda", rolling back the economic achievements that have helped us take billions out of poverty in only one generation, one of the greatest achievements in human history.

On the other side of our politics, what has become known as "populism" has a tendency to simply substitute focus groups for first principles and swap prejudice for evidence-based policy. It can allow empiricism to become the prisoner of "instinct" and political coherence to become a victim of short termism.

In a rational world, facts matter. Evidence matters. Clarity matters. So, let me be clear where my own starting point is in terms of the climate debate.

In his excellent book, *Paleoclimate*, Michael Bender points out that in the history of our planet there have been huge swings in our climate. We have had multiple periods where the earth was glaciated to the equator, lasting millions of years, and others when it was so warm dinosaurs lived on Antarctica.

He set out the four factors that have caused these climate modifications: changes in atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations, changes in the amount of sun's radiation reflected directly back to space, changes in the position of the continents that guide winds and ocean currents, and changes in the brightness of the sun itself.

I think it is very difficult to come to any other conclusion than that global warming and climate change, with all their unpredictable consequences, are real and that changes in greenhouse gas concentrations are by far the most likely reason.

The question then becomes how we should best respond to this most vital challenge?

I believe that we need to look to our own experiences from the past to determine our direction and to look to our own technological capabilities to provide a roadmap for the way forward.

In the pandemic, it was not the socialist or totalitarian states that produced the vaccines, and recently the medicines, that offer the best way out of this global tragedy. Rather than being the enemy of government strategies, the Oxford/AstraZenecas, the Pfizers and the Johnson & Johnsons utilised their private sector experience, flexibility and financial independence to help governments achieve their public policy aims.

In Britain, a constructive relationship between government, academic innovation and the power of the private sector pharmaceutical industry enabled us to take an early lead in global vaccine policy.

So, our choice will be between the de-growth agenda of the left, constantly telling us what must be forbidden in our private and public lives, or one of innovation, creativity and technological advance.

One that will enable not only the preservation of those freedoms that we cherish today but the advancement of the developing economies.

It is an agenda that will allow people there to share in the prosperity, health and freedom that we too often take for granted.

The “de-growth agenda” threatens to stifle economic development and fails to recognise why we have achieved the public health and environmental objectives of the past. The development of technology that produced cleaner energy sources enabled us to move away from the use of coal with important consequences for the quality of our air and a huge reduction in respiratory diseases.

A hundred years ago, or even less, cities like London or Glasgow, which was at the time the second city of the British Empire, could hardly have conceived of the lack of smog that we have today. The hospitals in which I trained in Glasgow have fundamentally different patient populations as a consequence.

The clean water that came to Glasgow as a consequence of sublime engineering capabilities and the development of sanitation which spread through the whole of the developed world did not occur by accident.

It is also, sadly, no coincidence that while the incidence of waterborne disease has plummeted in countries such as our own, over 500,000 children under the age of five died last year of waterborne diseases in developing countries, a true scandal for our time. De-growth of the richest economies will do nothing to help fund crucial development for some of the world’s poorest people.

No, the instincts of socialists will always be to tell us what we cannot do, and the issue of climate change will be used ruthlessly to set a political agenda in their own image if we allow that to happen.

Instead, we need to use the power of the free market to find ways of ensuring that progress continues, including for the world’s poorest, in a way that is consistent with the need to deal with what scientific evidence increasingly tells us is an existential threat.

So, let me look at two practical examples.

One of the environmental issues that makes me most angry is the way in which we are polluting our oceans in the most disgraceful ways.

In the years from 2000 – 2010, human beings made more plastic than all the plastic created up to that point in history. Estimates suggest that there are now between 15 and 50 trillion pieces of plastic in what were once pristine waters.

The knee-jerk reaction is to ban the sale and use of plastics which, although potentially a crucial weapon in our armoury, can only ever be a partial solution.

What we need to do is to harness our scientific ingenuity to ensure that we can develop environmentally friendly alternatives. Only this can help guarantee that we get the buy in of consumers to achieve the ends that we all want to see.

It can never be achieved simply by state dictat, but by the encouragement of the innovation and creativity that powers our technological progress and which can be supercharged by financial incentives in a free market.

Is there a role for government in helping to provide the encouragement, incentives and framework in such an approach? The answer has to be yes, as I mentioned in the example of the recent vaccine success. But it must be a model where the state acts as the enabler for the private sector, not a substitute.

When it comes to the broader arguments around climate change, it is clear that we need to develop a decarbonisation agenda that is affordable, sustainable and which commands public support, at least in the Western democracies where such a thing actually matters.

There are tough policy questions that we must answer that go well beyond well-meaning aspirations and end dates for the process.

What is our actual starting point on the journey towards decarbonisation, what is our current energy pattern and how much change will be needed?

How realistic is our timescale to achieve net zero?

How much capital will the decarbonisation agenda require, where will it come from and when?

What will be the role of new technologies in this process?

How do we avoid creating the risk of energy poverty amongst our people?

What is the wider international geopolitical context of the debate?

How do we avoid becoming dependent on potentially hostile states for our energy supplies during our transition to this brave new world?

These questions, and more, need urgent and detailed answers.

Simply wishing to arrive at a particular destination is no substitute for a detailed roadmap of how to get there.

We need to use some of our emerging technologies, and some of those not yet invented, to reach our climate change targets while, at the same time, maintaining the necessary political support.

Those who advocate a “de-growth” alternative fundamentally fail to understand human nature. We have all seen the academic work that looks at how people’s attitudes alter towards environmental issues depending on their disposable income.

It should come as no surprise that more organic foods are bought by those with higher incomes or that the political salience of environmental and climate issues diminishes in times of economic hardship or with higher levels of unemployment.

It is only natural, and commendable, to want to put food on the family’s table and provide basic necessities such as clothing and heating.

It is not only irritating, but politically naive at best, to hear an often Metropolitan middle-class telling those less wealthy than themselves what they ought to be giving up.

Our best way forward is to invest in proven technologies, encourage those in their infancy and continue to innovate to produce those capabilities that will, in the future, enable us to ensure that development, prosperity and sound environmental stewardship can safely coexist.

In the nuclear arena, the twin pressures of carbon mitigation and long-term rising global energy demand necessitate broad and significant deployments of nuclear energy worldwide.

Between the years 2000 and 2050, it is estimated three billion more people will move to cities. In a world nearing 10 billion people, more than 6 billion will live in urban areas, according to the United Nations. It is inconceivable that this massive scale of urbanisation – with more and more electric cars and buses, demands for clean water, and highrise apartments and office towers – could be met without a significant contribution from nuclear power. The advances in SMR (Small Modular Reactor) technology should be a green light for governments, regulators and investors worldwide to rapidly expand the sector.

Emerging technologies, including those under development in this

country to dramatically cut emissions, even from the cleanest fossil fuels, should be given every help and encouragement. They will enable us to transition to a decarbonised world while minimising social or political dislocation.

Finally, the promising trends in areas such as hydrogen power need to forge ahead at full speed, alongside the supporting capabilities in transport and safe storage where, again, in the UK, research is already well advanced.

All these pathways to a secure decarbonised future will need to come from the incubator of the world's most developed nations. They have the skills, the innovation and the financial capability to produce these results – and this is no accident.

The free market incentives, the lack of state interference and the innovative culture that all of these help nurture is the best hope that we have of reaching our climate change goals without reducing living standards in the developed world or holding back the fully justified hope of development in some of the world's poorer nations.

Going backwards or slowing down our economic advance and technological prowess is not the answer to the challenge of climate change. In fact, it will be a huge impediment.

The leaders of the free, democratic and capitalist world must recommit themselves to the principles that produced the innovation and scientific advance that has been our hallmark – an agenda based on creativity empowered by the free market.

It is time to have the courage to ensure that these same values drive the progress of tomorrow – for all the people of the world. And for the world itself.

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[Dr Liam Fox speaks in his Adjournment debate on Portishead Railway](#)

Monday, 29 November, 2021

Dr Liam Fox

(North Somerset) (Con)

Earlier today, I had the great pleasure of introducing my Down Syndrome private

Member's Bill, on which I was extremely grateful for the support of the Government. Let us hope that we can repeat that exercise now and make it two in a row.