SIXTY SECOND INTERVIEW: LORD HUNT OF CHESTERTON

Lord Julian Hunt is Professor of Climate Modelling at University College, London and Academic Director of the Lighthill Risk Network, the community of scientific and business expertise on risk (including climate change) with which Lloyd's has a partnership. He was Director-General and Chief Executive of the Meteorological Office from 1992-1997.

What one single thing convinces you most that climate change is taking place?

It's been recognised in the past year that ocean temperatures have increased by half a degree over the past 50 years. This data seems to be very good and we have been seeing evidence of it with a series of hot summers.

What is the most important thing you are personally doing on climate change?

My political role. We have to get legislators around the world to understand they have to make changes. I am working with Global Legislators for a Balanced Environment, which works with lawmakers in the G8 countries, but also Mexico, Brazil, India, China and South Africa. We're trying to get them to understand the issue because the Kyoto Protocol needs to be renewed and discussions will start at the 2008 G8 meeting in Japan. Privately, I'm a great user of public transport. We have a car but use it very little. We keep our home at pretty low temperatures. There are all these people in America who want to have their air conditioning on full in the summer and the heating on full in the winter. We're great believers in wearing jerseys in my house.

If you were the Prime Minister, what one thing would you do about climate change?

I would use the Government's procurement power to introduce much more sustainable buildings, construction methods and ways of operating. The Government is not doing this enough when it builds prisons, hospitals and schools. It's about the Government practicing what it preaches…

Do you agree with the Bishop of London that "making selfish choices such as flying on holiday or buying a large car are a symptom of sin"?

Each of us has a climate change footprint. We have to assess our total lives. If you want to fly off on holiday, which I do from time to time, you make sure that you do other things like buy lots of local produce or use the railway rather than the car. If you're just using your very large car simply to go shopping or take the kids to school, that's very wasteful.

There's so much noise about climate change - are people are in danger of becoming complacent?

At first, people just know about it from the media but then it becomes real. We saw this happen with the scare about the ozone layer a decade ago. People realised aerosols were a bad thing and stopped using them. We saw this again with the scare about genetically-modified food. When issues

are brought down to local buying decisions, people realise they can change things, eg windmills and solar collectors.

Is the Government doing enough to raise awareness and tackle climate change?

No. Generally carbon taxes and carbon trading are needed. In addition we urgently need to renegotiate the Chicago Convention of 1944, which says no tax should be levied on aviation fuel. The reason people fly short distances at the moment is that it can be much cheaper to do so because there are fuel taxes on energy for trains. This must change.

How will the Lighthill Risk Network help the insurance market to deal with climate change?

It will give them access to respected climate scientists. Getting data quickly from the scientific community can be difficult and the insurance industry needs to move rapidly. The idea is to have a network that will provide a database for the industry. We have a software system that people will be able to use to get answers and there are expert panels on climate change and other issues such as catastrophe modelling, who will help interpret current issues for the industry. There's a huge amount of data out there that needs to be made available and used.

How good are today's climate models at predicting the impact of climate change?

Temperatures have been calculated accurately for 150 years back now. This is a good indicator of the reliability of the modelling. Also models calculate the distribution of temperature between the northern and southern hemispheres and the changing fluctuations over decades. The trickiest problem is modelling precipitation, which is where models still differ quite a bit. But, since certain features of climate change are pretty well understood now, I think we can make predictions about the future global temperature rise. I think the findings are very scary.