

SIXTY SECOND INTERVIEW: LORD REES OF LUDLOW

Lord Martin Rees is President of the Royal Society, Professor of Cosmology and Astrophysics, and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. He holds the honorary title of Astronomer Royal and is the author or co-author of about 500 research papers, mainly on astrophysics and cosmology, as well as seven books. He was appointed to the House of Lords in 2005.

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

The main reason for concern is that the carbon dioxide level is rising by 0.5% a year and is now at a level that it has not been at for the last half a million years. I think if we knew nothing else than that, there would still be great reason for concern.

In what way will climate change affect our lives most in the next ten years?

In this country I think there will be no direct adverse effect in that timescale but on a longer timescale there will be the well-known effects of rising sea levels. And in the short-term there will be adverse consequences in other parts of the world, such as Africa and other areas.

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

I am becoming more and more conscious of the need to avoid waste. I use a small economical car, for instance.

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

I think Tony Blair has already played an important role leading the G8 nations on climate change. I think he was right to do this and the issue is now high on the international agenda. The recently published Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change will have an impact internationally as well as helping the G8 nations to move further forward on this subject. To be effective, effort on climate change has to be international. The UK Government has taken a good lead on this. The other thing it has to do is to promote energy-saving measures and promote research and development. This is where the UK has a potential competitive advantage.

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”?

Bishops are experts in defining sins and I am not, but one change that may happen, and I hope will happen over the next few years, is that it will become socially unacceptable to be conspicuously wasteful. There has already been a turnaround in social attitudes towards drink-driving and smoking. I suspect there will be also be a change of attitudes that will make it socially unacceptable to be conspicuously wasteful of energy.

With there currently being so much noise about climate change, are people in danger of becoming complacent?

It's a difficult issue for the public because the downside is very long-term and is international, unlike pollution for instance. People are concerned about pollution because it affects their localities. The effects of carbon dioxide emissions are worldwide rather than local and the most severe effects will be felt far in the future. This makes it hard for individuals to feel the same about it. However, there are other issues, which are long-term, like pensions or whether more nuclear power stations should be built, where action is currently being taken. This action will benefit people 50 years from now and I think people will realise that steps also need to be taken to reduce energy usage and deal with the climate change problem over the next 50 years.

How will climate change alter the business environment? How should it affect business travel and company car policies, for example?

Clearly there has to be a movement towards more use of alternative energy and renewables. I think that over the next 20-30 years we will see a great deal of effort mobilised to help with this problem. I would also hope that manifestly wasteful travel will be regarded as socially unacceptable and that businesses will have public relations reasons to be aware of that. Information technology and miniature robotics are developing in such a way that they should reduce the need to travel. For instance, there will be increased use of alternatives, such as videoconferencing.

What's in it for business to adapt their models to climate change? How will it benefit them? What are the risks if they don't adapt?

I have limited faith in the social conscience of the financial industry so I think there needs to be some sort of regulation that promotes fuel efficiency and energy saving. The government, or maybe the G8 nations collectively, may need to agree on some fiscal incentives. The report by Sir Nicholas Stern sets out parameters for how this might be done.

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

The UK Government has been taking a good lead on climate change, in contrast to the US government of course, but we need to promote research and development into new forms of generating energy. In the UK we have the capability to lead the way in research and development into new forms of 'clean' energy and renewable energy generation. We need to make young people much more proactive about studying science and becoming scientists. Science is almost regarded as a dirty subject at the moment. A proactive approach needs to be taken towards the problems of developing new energy sources. I would like to see a programme of education on this topic. Presenting science as the way of solving problems that threaten the future of the planet should appeal to the idealism of young. It may help us come up with some new solutions.