



Episode 653: The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels: Educating Barbara Boxer

Guest: Alex Epstein

WOODS: Of course I want to talk about your testimony, your Senate testimony from last month, April 2016. What was the name of the subcommittee that you were speaking to?

EPSTEIN: It's the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, lead by James Inhofe and co-chaired by Senator Barbara Boxer, my own senator here in California.

WOODS: Okay, now, what was the theme of this particular hearing? My understanding is that it was meant to be a hearing, I don't know, more or less in opposition to the president's energy policies. Is that right?

EPSTEIN: Yeah, the official title was "Examining the Role of Environmental Policies on Access to Energy and Economic Opportunity." Now, "environmental policies" refers to President Obama's environmental policies, particularly the ones that have no regard for the Constitution, since he just ordered them on us, and I wouldn't call them "environmental policies"; I would just call them "anti-energy policies," because it implies that they actually help our environment, which is a subject we can discuss. But in any case, it was initiated by the Republicans, and it certainly was not intended to be pro-Obama, although Obama supporters were there in full force.

WOODS: Both in terms of people in — you're talking about the people who were offering testimony?

EPSTEIN: Well, as I saw it, there were two people on you could call it the pro-Obama side, the Democrats, and there were three people picked by the Republicans, which I assume that's just because they're the majority. But certainly the loudest senators on this issue and in this hearing were on the Democrat side.

WOODS: Yeah, so we'll get to Barbara Boxer toward the end. But you started off with an opening statement that I think, of course you've had some time to talk about your book, *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*, and you've got it now where you can give people a really, really provocative overview in that five-minute period. Now, we've talked about your book, *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*, in the past. I'm linking to it at TomWoods.com/653, which is today's page, and I urge people to go back and listen to that one, because it's top notch. It was a perspective on things that I had not thought

of before, and then listening – I watched the video – I'm also going to link on that page to the hearing. In particular, I want people to hear your opening statement. But give us the basics. What were you trying to tell those people about fossil fuels that is different from what we hear pretty much all the time?

EPSTEIN: Well, the context of this was, as I mentioned, the so-called environmental or so-called climate policies, and one thing I pointed out from the outset was that these policies particularly favor solar and wind and want to dramatically restrict or even ban the use of fossil fuels. So one thing I pointed out at the outset was that this curious selection of just solar and wind, which curiously leaves out nuclear and hydro, which are non-carbon forms of energy, is a prescription for death, because it is telling us to rely on unreliable energy. And I cited the example of Germany, which has tried to rely on unreliable energy and has just spent hundreds of billions of dollars adding useless infrastructure to its grid, because if you can't rely on the energy, you still need the same amount of reliable energy to be available at all times, so it just ends up being this huge amount of junk energy that you're putting on the network. And thus, their prices are three to four times higher than ours.

So I wanted to just say something quickly about if you're considering a new policy, why not look at where it's been practiced, and if you look at where it's been practiced, this policy, which I call an unrelialist policy, it's been a complete disaster. And then the rationalization of that is what I call the moral case against fossil fuels, the idea that fossil fuels are a self-destructive addiction that are destroying our planet, and in particular, I wanted to focus on the climate issue, because that's the one that has been the most prominent justification.

And there is this idea that fossil fuels are causing climate change. And here is where the philosopher in me comes out in the testimony, and when I think about it, that what kind of argument is this to say that we shouldn't use fossil fuels because they cause climate change? And for that to have any meaning at all, you would have to know what the heck you mean by climate change, and I mentioned to the committee that you have not defined at all what you mean by climate change, and I said, that while nearly everyone agrees that more CO₂ in the atmosphere causes some climate change, it makes all the difference in the world, whether that change is a mild, manageable warming or a runaway catastrophic one.

So from there, in terms of looking at any product, you have to look at both the positives and the risks and side effects. And so what I looked at was if you distinguish between what's demonstrated and what's speculated, it's a very mild side effect, and the positive effect is so positive across the board, and it's so positive that even in the realm of climate it makes life far better than it does any negative, because the key thing for climate safety is how good is your climate protection. Nature doesn't give us safe climate; we need to make the naturally dangerous climate safe.

And so I just point out all the data of how amazing fossil fuels are for producing energy, and thereby even for climate protection. And at the end, I really appealed to them and said, look, these are the facts, this is the nature of it if you care about

human life. I realize you've taken these positions against it, but if you actually care about human beings you really need to think about it in this way, in this big picture, humanistic way, and you'll come to a definite conclusion. And you know, I tried my best to sincerely convince them, and I think I did a good job with the people viewing, but not with the people there, because they did not pay very much attention to what I said.

WOODS: Right, that seems to be the case, and it's probably more or less what you expected. Can you first just tell me what the format of this sort of hearing is? Do you offer your opening statement and then they question you and then somebody else comes on and they question that person? Or are all the people sitting there on a panel and you're all taking questions randomly? How does it work?

EPSTEIN: So what happens is they call on the five witnesses, I guess we were called, first, and I happened to be the fifth. I was told I was going to be the first, which I was excited about, until I saw that none of the senators were there, except for Boxer and Inhofe, because I realized they were just waiting for their turn. So fortunately, I don't know if I have anyone to thank for this, but fortunately I got to go last, which was not only fairly dramatic, but also the senators had come there so they could give their spiel and then leave. So just the format of it is not very serious, in terms of the idea of listening to witnesses. I mean, imagine an actual trial, where the people just come in and out and the lawyers just come in and out and the judge comes in and out. It's sort of like that.

So in terms of the witnesses on my side, so to speak, there was a national security expert and then a priest, and then there was me, the philosopher. And then on the other side, they brought their own national security expert and their own religious figure, a pastor, and obviously they didn't think they needed a philosopher, because as Barbara Boxer observed later or commented later, a philosopher has no place in a debate that involves science, which we'll get to talk about.

WOODS: Yeah, we'll get to that for sure.

EPSTEIN: But was one thing about the hearing that I found disturbing was how little science and reason were discussed and how much pandering there was to religious figures that were allegedly sympathetic to the Democrats' view, and to me this just pointed out to them – you know, because they wouldn't listen to these religious figures at all on other issues. So to me it just pointed out that with their use of science and their use of religion, they're completely opportunistic, in terms of whatever supports statism they'll jump onto and whatever doesn't doesn't. So to see Barbara Boxer requesting passages from the Green Bible to be added to her personal stable of arguments was, in my view, shameful.

WOODS: Especially when she's the one criticizing you for being a philosopher and allegedly not having anything relevant to say. Well, talk about not having anything relevant to say. I don't want to talk about the climate change issue in the traditional way. We addressed that in a previous episode, and I've covered that on the show, but I

am interested in the — I think you have handled this in a somewhat unique way, building on some work of some Cato people, in thinking in terms of the over all picture of how climate affects and can harm human beings. On balance it's just overwhelming that fossil fuels have, in fact, protected us against climate catastrophes of various kinds. Can you say something about that?

EPSTEIN: Yeah, here's a way I've been thinking about it, just even in the last week. In different kinds of concepts we have this idea of a background, like background risk, background noise, background radiation. And if you think about the background climate danger, background climate change that causes background climate danger, it is absolutely massive. So the reason why historically people prayed to climate-related gods was that climate was such a potential benefactor, but also such a potential terror.

So when we're talking about the issue of climate, what we have to avoid at all costs is what I call the perfect planet premise, which is that nature gives us a planet that's perfectly suitable to human life, and then all we do is we plunder and pollute it. And that's exactly the opposite of the truth. You know, the ancients who were sacrificing people to the climate gods, they didn't meaningfully change the atmosphere, but the point is they didn't meaningfully change the world around them to be safe from the naturally dangerous atmosphere.

So what we have done as human beings is we have engaged in, in a sense, in climate change in the most profound sense; not in increasing the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere from .03% to .04%, but completely changing the effective climate that we live in. So when there's a rainstorm outside, the climate that you live in is completely different from the climate that is outside. The vast majority of us live in atmospheric surroundings that in no way resemble that of our ancestors even 10,000 years ago, because we choose, we've mastered the climate to where we choose when we want to go outside, and the vast majority of the time we're inside and insulated.

And this is important, because people have this bizarre notion that we're perfectly adapted to a certain kind of climate, which makes no sense on any number of levels, because a climate is not a singular thing and there are millions of different climates around the world. But just on any level, it's just a fact that the actual atmospheric surroundings that we deal with are completely different because of technology in a very, very good way. So the amount that we've changed that situation by adding a little bit more CO₂ to the atmosphere we've found is trivial. Now, it is the kind of thing one needs to explore, but upon exploration, it turns out to be, like many things, a minor side effect that doesn't change much the background situation.

WOODS: Give me some specific examples, then, of how we've made these changes that have been favorable.

EPSTEIN: Oh, sure. So the number one — this came up in a video we'll put up soon on our YouTube page, [YouTube.com/ImproveThePlanet](https://www.youtube.com/ImproveThePlanet). But there was this climate scientist who asked for permission to critique my presentation last week at the

Colorado School of Mines, and I said, yeah, go for it. And one thing he said was, oh yeah, well, the reason why climate-related deaths have fallen – and I pointed out they've fallen by a rate of 98% since major fossil fuel emission began 80 years ago, which is just – think about that. 98%. You're 50 times safer from climate. And he said, oh yeah, that's just because we have weather-detection satellites; that's the number one reason. And I said, well, you know, no matter what profession you are, you actually have to know what you're talking about. That is just a completely false statement that you just made up. The number one reason why climate-related deaths fall is because of the problem of drought.

So what's drought? Drought means basically less water than you expected. Well, once you have irrigation technology, once you have drought relief, once you have crop transport, once you have modern agriculture, drought becomes progressively a nonissue in human life. So drought-related deaths have been down something like 99.98%, because what we've done is we've mastered the problem of food production. Now, in the non-capitalist world, it's considerably less, although it's more thanks to the beneficence of the capitalist world. But that's just one amazing example. But even heating and air conditioning, it's no coincidence that the places often with the lowest heat-related deaths are places like Florida and Arizona. Why is that? Because nature doesn't give us a safe climate we make dangerous; it gives us a dangerous climate we make safe.

WOODS: All right, yeah. All right, again, that's the sort of thing that even somebody like me, who is inclined to your thesis, I just never would have thought of it that way. And then you compare that to the .03 to .04, and you have to make a decision. How do you compare – if you had to compare fossil fuels and nuclear energy, is there any reason to prefer one over the other?

EPSTEIN: Well, we have sort of weird – a lot of the way to think about fossil fuels properly is just to think about it the way we think about any other energy technology or any other technology. So if you take something like vaccines, we tend to think of vaccines in terms of what are the benefits and what are the side effects. And so if somebody says, well, you shouldn't vaccinate your kids because vaccines have side effects, you'd say, wait a second, I'm not a vaccine-side-effect-denier, but I certainly think that the benefits outweigh those risks, or certainly many, many do, and that would be my inclination by far. But then when we get to the realm of fossil fuels, it's considered completely acceptable to talk about a side effect absent the benefit and to use the side effect or a risk as justification for outlawing something. But if you did that, then you could justify outlawing anything, certainly solar panels and windmills, which have, for example, very, very deadly mining processes associated with the manufacture of them. So sorry, I just sidestepped your question, not out of evasion; I just wanted – what was the end of your question?

WOODS: Well, I want to know, given that I know you would support both nuclear energy and fossil fuels, how would you compare them?

EPSTEIN: Well, so this is the point in terms of how we think — so I mentioned thinking of the benefits versus the risks and side effects. But we generally recognize is that different products are good for different people, so this applies even within the fossil fuels. Sometimes coal is a better solution than gas; gas is sometimes a better solution than coal. It depends on the needs of the consumer, the cost effectiveness of the producer, in the same way that for some people Mercedes is the right solution and for some people, you know, a low-level Hyundai is the right solution. And sometimes you have higher grades of things and lower grades of things.

So with nuclear and fossil fuels, the basic thing is it just depends on the context. So for example, if you need a source of power that can rapidly scale up and down in terms of electricity, natural gas is way better than nuclear, because nuclear takes a while to scale up and scale down in terms of the amount of it. If you want something that's super reliable, can run 90+% of the time, nuclear is the thing. If you want something that can run a submarine for years and years and years, nothing can compare to nuclear power, because it stores so much energy per unit of mass and per unit of volume, what's called the energy density issue.

Now ultimately, the biggest issue is going to be how cost effective this is, and unfortunately it's very hard to know what the potential of nuclear is, because it's been attacked by the green movement even longer than fossil fuels have been attacked, so my inclination is that it could be very, very economic, but right now in most cases it's uneconomic. But it's because it's treated as this mortal threat, and therefore every stage of the process is guilty until proven innocent, and therefore if it takes forever to build something, then you're not going to even really want to get engaged in it, and your cost of capital goes up like crazy the longer these time horizons are. So basically the environmentalists who supposedly hate carbon-based energy and want non-carbon energy have opposed by far the most practical force of non-carbon energy, showing that what they're against is practical technology, not CO2 levels.

WOODS: Let's go back to the hearing and talk about Barbara Boxer. You did get some sympathetic questions, naturally, from some people on the committee, and it was friendly enough, but Barbara Boxer was not friendly. She was outright, just downright appalled at what you were saying. So tell us exactly what she said in a nutshell, and now that you have some more leisurely environment, what would you want to say to her in response?

EPSTEIN: Well, happily, I prepared a lot, and I said exactly what I wanted to say.

WOODS: That's great.

EPSTEIN: So I have no regrets about it. But one thing to think about in case any of you are ever going to go in this situation is you really need to be strategic in an environment where somebody has the upper hand. Like, imagine you're on Rush Limbaugh or something, who's a great host, but that guy can cut you off at any moment. You have to be thinking of that. That's what a senator can do. They can cut you off at any moment. And as much as I would like to believe that she would listen to

me, she's got a reputation to uphold; she has a lot of her pseudo-self-esteem, I would call it, invested in this issue. So I know that she's going to war as soon as she — she might not know who I am in advance, but once I present she's going to see, oh, there's an argument here, I want to discredit this guy.

So in advance, I know that she's going to try to pull a couple stunts. One of them might be to connect me with the fossil fuels, which I dealt with a certain way, which I can talk about. But the first thing she did was she wanted to define me as a non-scientist. There's a certain kind of narrative that if you're not a "scientist," which is again one of these incredibly vague terms like "climate change." If you're not a scientist, you have nothing to say about the issues connected to climate, which is kind of bizarre, since the main issues connected to climate are economic issues, as we already saw. The key issue with climate is an issue of human adaptation, let alone all the positive economic benefits that you have to consider with fossil fuel energy. So I made all of these points painstakingly. You can see them online. I appreciate your comment that I did it well. I did it as carefully as I could, for sure. So all of this, and what does Barbara Boxer say? She says, "Mr. Epstein, are you a scientist?" So if you know what's going on, it's not my first rodeo. It's my first Senate hearing, but I know how these guys work.

WOODS: Sure.

EPSTEIN: So what does she want me to say? She wants me to stammer; she wants me to get awkward, to get defensive, and then to kind of say no sheepishly, and then she's going to move on. So we shouldn't listen to you. The end. And then I'm done. Now, when the Republicans give me a question, I can try to circle back, but I just said, "No," very quickly; I said, "No, I'm a philosopher," and nothing else. Because there are a lot of things, because people — what people think you should do, by the way, is they think you should ask her if she's a scientist. Now, by the way, anyone who thinks that, because people think that, that will not work. If you're ever in a situation, if you ask someone a question, "What do you do?", you give them control. You can't ask them a question, then interrupt them. You can try if you're Barbara Boxer, but she has to at least give me a second.

So I said, "No, I'm a philosopher." And then she's like, "That's interesting. Why would we need a philosopher?" And she's not asking me, but I know I've got a window here, and I know I have to say something. And I said, "I'm here to teach you how to think more clearly about the issues." And she's pretty quick, so you can watch this, so she picked that up immediately and said, "Well, I don't think I need help thinking more clearly," but everyone's laughing at her and her staff is laughing, which I think she gets annoyed at. And then she starts ranting a little bit, and then she makes one more point, and I said, "I just want to make a point; it's to help you see the big picture." And she says, "I don't need to be lectured by a philosopher. All we need to know is that you're a philosopher, and you're talking about science." So that's it. But she's getting a little bit unhinged.

And then she immediately goes to — this is the comical element that I don't know if she was self-conscious of. She's berating the Republicans for bringing in a philosopher,

and then she talks to this guy, Reverend Nelson, I believe was his name, you know, who had made a kind of standard people-are-suffering, I-blame-it-all-on-fossil-fuels type narrative, which you can do with anything that you want to attack; just, it's the cause of all the evils in the world. And she called him the most eloquent speaker she had ever heard, which if you hear this guy, it's obviously a lie, and this is a black guy, so this is just a typical, like, calling a black guy articulate if he speaks English, which is an incredibly racist thing to do, so I don't think that went over well anyway. But I'm really into the strategy of this kind of thing.

But anyway, she goes and she starts gushing over this religious guy who made no scientific points at all, and she goes to him, and then he cites this Green Bible; I guess it's a Bible that has all of the allegedly green passages highlighted. It definitely didn't have the stuff at the beginning about man having dominion over everything. But it's this Green Bible, and then she talks about how she wants those passages. So basically she wants nothing about thinking logically and big-picture from the philosopher; that's irrelevant, but she wants passages from the Green Bible on record, which, again, is just total opportunism. She's just trying to shame me. She did it to the priest on my side by trying to talk about his funding. And when you're going into these things, you've got to realize that this is a war and you'd better be prepared.

WOODS: Yeah, now, let's talk about that trying to tie people to the fossil fuel industry, because you hit back on that, even though you don't get any funding from anybody. You're self-supporting entirely. But Father Sirico of the Acton Institute, apparently some small percentage of their funding has come from different companies of this sort, and so this is supposed to discredit him completely. And you spoke out against this line of argument. How did you do that?

EPSTEIN: Yeah, well, first of all I did know this was going to come up and be used against me.

WOODS: Of course.

EPSTEIN: But anyone, if you're in this situation, you've got to know this, and you have to own it. If somebody's going to attack you on something that you're proud of, you have to own that thing before they attack you. And so my thing was I hadn't heard it used against me, because she was trying to insult me as a non-scientist, but I knew it was coming and it needed to be said, because it absolutely makes me sick that it's considered damning to be connected with the industry that's providing all the energy that's keeping us in the room alive. Barbara Boxer's 75 years old. Where is she without the fossil fuel industry? She's in the ground – same place they want to keep fossil fuels. That's for sure where she would be. So these people are providing us energy, so I'm not steaming, but it's time for justice in this situation.

So I said, look, I'm an independent person; I don't have funding; I'm not a nonprofit, but I do certainly speak and I speak at companies, and I'm damn proud of that, because these are companies that are keeping us alive, and you guys are a bunch of ingrates; most of you'd be dead – although I said it a little bit more nicely than that –

without them, and if you're going to use their energy you should be grateful. And then I had to turn to Senator Whitehouse, who had given a speech where he didn't address anything I said, just the others, because I don't think, he wasn't prepared for what I said.

But in any case, he came and left, but he was my number one target there, not Boxer, because he's the one who's been cracking down on ExxonMobil in particular, but other companies for this idea that they knew about catastrophic climate change and didn't say anything. So his basic premise is if you don't say what he agrees with, then you get to be prosecuted. So that I call as a violation of the First Amendment, and I said that he should apologize for this or resign, and that got a certain kind of gasp, but I thought that was a very legitimate point, since I thought that the government was supposed to function according to the Constitution.

WOODS: Well, yeah, you were at exactly the wrong place, unfortunately, to be making that kind of argument. Now, I'm interested in the fact that you speak at times in front of energy companies, because, you know, I sometimes get the feeling almost that the energy companies – well, take BP, for example. Now they call themselves "Beyond Petroleum," as their little slogan; it's like they're embarrassed about their own product.

EPSTEIN: Well, yeah, they stopped doing that.

WOODS: Oh, have they? Okay.

EPSTEIN: Yeah. But anyway, sorry, continue your question.

WOODS: Well, in other words, it's interesting to me that they would have you come speak with a book with your title like that. Do you get the sense among these companies that they're starting to push back and they're not going to be on the defensive anymore?

EPSTEIN: Yeah, you know, when I started the Center for Industrial Progress about four and a half years ago, one of my big goals was to try to get business on board, because if you think about it, if they're the ones producing the value, they're the ones whose freedom is most directly under attack, and they won't fight, it makes my job much, much harder. So my question was, is there a way that I can convince them that doing the right thing is also consistent with their bottom line, because if you're telling them to be a martyr, it's very hard, particularly if it's a public company. There are issues of fiduciary duty to shareholders.

And what I realized was if you can teach them how to make better arguments, how to take the moral high ground – and the best way to do that and the right way to do that is by arguing for economic freedom. If you can do that, then there will really be a harmony of interests, and I think that's one thing I've done that I'm proud of and I think can be done with other realms of capitalism, where I've showed the companies an effective way to use the right ideas. I think often there's this disconnect between the

nonprofit or academic world and the business world, where the nonprofit/academic world, at least the free market part of it, is very frustrated with business, understandably, but they haven't figured out how to translate what they know into something that will work for the businesses, so then the businesses are at the mercy of just all the PR people. But what I found was that once they were given another alternative, they were very excited about it.

So I spend a lot of time these days talking to businesses, getting them involved, speaking to them. And the broader mission there is to get them and their employees in particular – we're talking about millions of people in America – to get them to be part of a broader, pro-human progress movement. And it's going really well.

WOODS: Let's try and wrap this up with a big picture sort of a question. You're dealing with people you believe are not only sabotaging the human race; they're advocating policies that sabotage themselves. These are policies that, from the point of view of human well-being and their own self-interest, don't make any sense. So you must have sat around wondering why people think and act this way. And there are different possibilities. It's sheer irrationality – well, I don't know. Maybe that's the only possibility. How do you understand what you're observing people doing?

EPSTEIN: As a resource on this topic, I'd recommend a book many of your listeners have probably heard of and I've been recently rereading, which is *Atlas Shrugged*, by Ayn Rand, because one of the questions that the book raises is how can the parasites of the book, these government officials, these corrupt businessmen, how can they be cracking down on the producers whom they depend on, who make their lives possible. And I won't give you the full answer in the book, but that's a book that really addresses it a lot.

And I think one thing to note is just that there are many different kinds of motivations for a human being. In addition to things like not thinking long-range, a lot of people are not after money, and even being after money is a very kind of misleading thing, because being after everything is ultimately psychological, in a way. And of course you need to survive, but they're after certain kinds of feelings, and for Barbara Boxer or Whitehouse or any of these other guys, it's not that the thing that matters most to them is just piling up money like Scrooge McDuck. That's not why you become a senator.

But what does matter to them is prestige, is superiority, and so this is a ticket to superiority. Right now, unfortunately, to be part of the green movement, to be anti-fossil fuel makes you superior to others. Now, that's part of what I'm trying to destroy with *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels*, which makes somebody who opposes fossil fuels morally inferior, but that's the way it is now. So I think it's just important to realize that there are all these different kinds of motivations, and that for ourselves, the motivations we want are motivations that truly lead to human flourishing, rather than these kinds of competitive, low self-esteem motivations that just want us to be superior to other people.

But if you watch that hearing, these people are not interested in figuring out the truth about what will lead to human flourishing; they're interested in showing me up, showing other people up, making themselves look smart. And you know, when somebody doesn't have electricity to power an incubator, you should think about, wow, somebody wanting to feel superior to somebody else is part of the reason they don't have that electricity. That is pretty low.

WOODS: Alex, I'm going to have links to you and your book at TomWoods.com/653, but for people who don't go there, how can they find out more about you and follow your work?

EPSTEIN: Easiest way is IndustrialProgress.com. There you'll find links to the book. The thing I'd most recommend is there's just a little box to join our mailing list. We just send out one email a week, but if you were on this list you would have gotten those videos ASAP. So we have different things, like communications tips, some of the strategic things I've been talking about here, so at IndustrialProgress.com. And those of you who are Twitter heads, @alexepstein. I'm pretty easy to find on all those social media things. And thank you for asking.

WOODS: Okay, my pleasure. It's always great to talk to you, and when I saw that you had a confrontation with Barbara Boxer, I thought, all right, obviously time to have Alex back on. I'm glad I decided to do that. Thanks a lot.

EPSTEIN: Thanks for having me.