



## PATRICIA LERNER

### Senior Political Advisor, Greenpeace International

#### **Age:** Old enough to remember:

- (a) how devastated her mother was when JFK was assassinated;
- (b) to have a childhood memory of UN troops – Sikhs wearing UN blue turbans – keeping the peace in the Congo where she grew up;
- (c) to remember how to communicate before e-mail;
- (d) living in Upper Volta when it was still Upper Volta; and
- (e) to have partied with George Clooney before anyone else had ever heard of him.

**Born:** New Haven, Connecticut (USA) to a French mother and an American father.

#### **Current location**

Greenpeace International, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

**Patricia, you've had a very successful career as a senior manager, leader and diplomat for the US Agency for International Development. What drew you to Greenpeace?**

For some time I've been concerned that the current development model doesn't work for the people who are living in developing countries, but I felt that nobody was willing to question why that was. If it worked, donors wouldn't be 'celebrating' being in a country 50 years later, would they? So I felt it was time to look at the world through new lenses, develop new skills, find my voice and have some fun along the way. I have long admired the passion and commitment of people in Greenpeace, but I was particularly impressed by the sophistication of the campaign to introduce strong regulations on chemicals and their safe use in Europe (known as REACH), which I watched while I was in Brussels. Truly amazing work!

**You've been with the organisation for almost three years now. What makes working for Greenpeace different to your previous career? Are there similarities?**

We're a global organisation and we have a much better sense of what citizens' hopes and aspirations are in very different places – from France to China. As like-minded people who share a common vision, we have changed the world and made it more just, made politicians and corporations more accountable. The fact we don't accept funding from governments or corporations permits us to be independent and call it as we see it from our perspective as an environmental organisation. That's powerful and respected. As for similarities: I hate to say it, but internal processes are more alike than I was expecting.

**Your particular interest is climate change – what is it about the issue that drives you?**

It's actually the politics of climate change. I have a particular affinity for the issues confronted by the most vulnerable countries in the Caribbean where sea level rise threatens their very existence and they are vulnerable to hurricanes. I lived through Hurricane Gilbert in Jamaica and arrived in Barbados just after Hurricane Hugo wreaked havoc and left devastation on a number of islands. So I have been involved in disaster response and reconstruction. I was just back in Barbados for the first time in four years and was shocked and saddened to see huge chunks of the Caribbean coast beaches gone. Bajan friends were angry and upset by how their communities have been affected and are starting to go to town planning meetings to raise their voices about the sustainable development of their island home.

**Greenpeace is known for high-profile actions and creative confrontation – it's a highly effective way to get the message across. The flip-side is that people sometimes reduce the organisation to that aspect. What is so important about the behind-the-scenes political work you do?**

Political change is what Greenpeace is ultimately about. The occupation of the Brent Spar is what people see and remember. But the real victory is when the dumping of oil platforms is outlawed. That takes political understanding – and requires some of us to hang out at seemingly boring political meetings. We translate complex political issues and processes for our colleagues so collectively we, as a campaigning organisation, can not only be loud and visible, but can also achieve real change. Part of what we do is talk to policy makers, try to understand where they are coming from, what their red lines are, how open they are to thinking of new approaches, what their agendas are, who they are influenced by, who they influence and then we share ideas on ways forward. That groundwork enables us to be strategic in identifying issues or countries we can move.



**Greenpeace isn't just another lobbying group. 40 years after the organisation was founded, what continues to make it special?**

It's a culture of people who believe they can change the world, people who have the courage of their convictions, people who don't believe in compromise when the stakes for the planet, its people and biodiversity are so high. But we need to keep an eye on what's coming up 5 to 10 years from now, so we can anticipate new challenges, have the agility to respond to new opportunities and confront 'malice aforethought' when we see it.

**The fight against climate change is probably the greatest challenge the environmental movement has ever faced. Which concrete political steps would you like to see in the next few years?**

I hope that over the course of the next three years countries will finalise negotiations on a new international climate agreement which will drive a transformation to a low-carbon economy. I bring a development finance background to the debate over climate finance and am particularly seized with the G20 commitment to phase out fossil fuel subsidies. There's an estimated \$600bn US dollars of fossil fuel subsidies, of which \$100bn goes to the likes of Exxon to produce ever more oil. If you recall what was agreed in Copenhagen, \$100bn happens to be the same amount of funding rich countries pledged to provide vulnerable countries to adapt to climate change. Now that many of those rich countries are facing deficits, they are starting to wake up and look seriously at how to stop those subsidies. They also know they need to find innovative sources of finance to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and climate finance has to be new and additional to that. So phasing out fossil fuel subsidies can be a win-win-win.

**You've been looking at the links between peace and security and climate change issues. What are these links?**

I think we are starting to see a nexus of food-water-energy issues that could lead to resource wars. There are security aspects for low-lying Small Island Developing States, whose very survival is at risk. We are talking about the loss of territorial integrity through sea-level rise, or statelessness if an entire nation disappears either because it is incapable of supporting life (if there's no water or agriculture due to the impacts of climate change) or has submerged. Prior to joining Greenpeace, I spoke at a conference on 'Security, Development and Forest Conflict', which brought together key stakeholders engaged in forest conflicts in the DRC, Liberia and Indonesia. These issues are very real for the people living in those communities.

**You have quite a demanding job. What's your recipe for getting away from it all?**

I'm a beach bum at heart, so whenever I can get away I head to a nice beach off the beaten track with a bunch of novels (usually popular fiction) or biographies. The great thing about being based in Amsterdam is there's plenty to do in the arts and music (which are my particular interests), but it's also easy to catch a train to Brussels, Paris, London, cities I know well. Great jazz at the Music Village off the Grand Place in Brussels, good reggae at the Paradiso in Amsterdam, wonderful art galleries and museums in all those cities - but I'm a particular fan of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

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