

Rory Bremner

on Bush, burqas and kilts 9

Martin Bright

Tories storm Blair's backyard 10

newstatesman

www.newstatesman.com

17 October 2005

£2.50

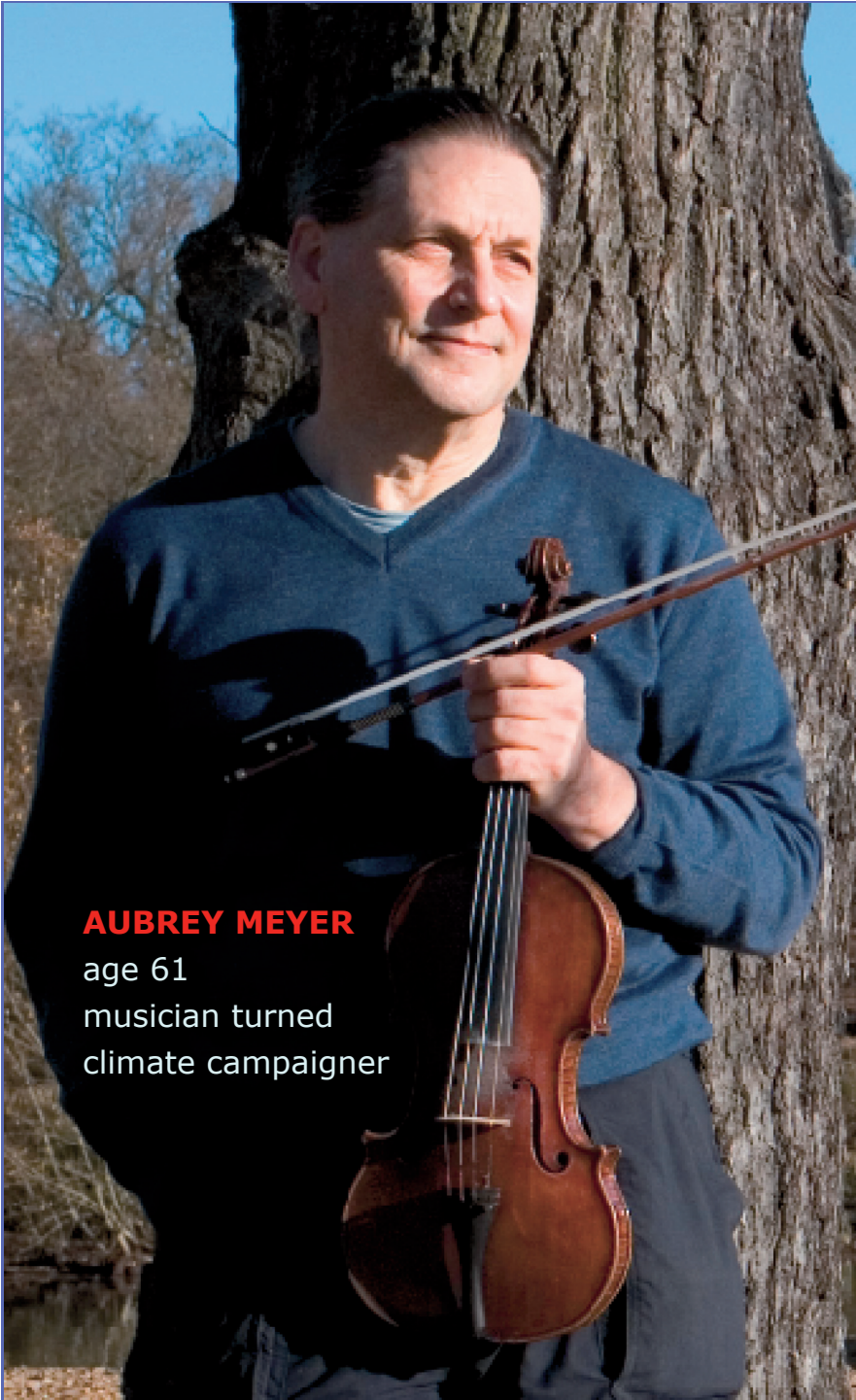
SPECIAL ISSUE

10
people
who will
change
the world

AUBREY MEYER

age 61

musician turned
climate campaigner





Age: 58
Born: Bradford, UK
Lives: London
Current position: Heads own pressure group, Global Commons Institute

AUBREY MEYER DOES THIS EX-MUSICIAN HOLD THE ANSWER TO THE WORLD'S CLIMATE CRISIS? BY MARK LYNAS

One of the few certainties of working on climate change is that at some point Aubrey Meyer will phone you up. The calls come out of the blue, often at inconvenient times, and can last for hours. Why do we busy global-warming types put up with it? Because it isn't every day that someone comes up with the answer to the world's greatest-ever problem.

Meyer's early career was not in science or campaigning, but in music. Born in Bradford in 1947, he spent his childhood in South Africa after his parents divorced. Returning to Britain, he became a proficient viola player, and by the 1980s was performing regularly with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as gaining recognition as a composer (a 1983 ballet composition earned a rave review in the *NS*). Then, one night, his four-year-old daughter asked him a question that would change his life: "Daddy, is the planet really dying?" Finding that he was unable to give her a satisfactory answer, Meyer sold his viola and joined the Green Party, campaigning energetically to save the rainforest before turning his attention to the climate.

By the mid-1990s, Meyer was a fixture at UN climate-change negotiations – but not, as almost all environmentalists were at the time, as a supporter of what became the Kyoto Protocol. Kyoto, signed in 1997, called for industrialised nations to reduce their greenhouse emissions by 5 per cent by 2012. Developing countries, in recognition of their historic lower greenhouse emissions, were not given targets – a big reason, George Bush said, for America's withdrawal in 2001. Meyer sympathised with the US position but also went further, criticising Kyoto's piecemeal, incrementalist approach and failure to offer prescriptions for what will happen after the 2012 cut-off.

Meyer realised that, if humanity is to survive climate change, a very different kind of international agreement will be required. Climate change threatens humanity as a whole, and so requires a species-level response. Meyer's proposal – "contraction and convergence" (C&C) – proceeds from the recognition that all countries must act together to set a limit on global greenhouse emissions. Once this limit is agreed (the contraction bit), they must decide how the remaining emissions are to be shared. Meyer's suggested basis for this is equity. Given that we are all created equal, why should poor countries accept a smaller share of the shrinking pie? And so, after a period of transition, all countries are allocated emissions entitlements based on their populations (convergence).

In practice, both the contraction cap on emissions and the convergence date to equity would be negotiable. World governments might, say, agree to limit global carbon-dioxide concentrations to 450 parts per million – enough, it is hoped, to keep global warming below 2°C – with convergence by 2030. This would give a less developed country such as Bangladesh a large wad of unused emissions, which it could sell for cash on world markets. Countries such as Australia, meanwhile, would have to buy spare emissions credits in order to keep on using a disproportionate amount of fossil fuel. The result would be large financial flows from rich to poor, giving developing countries the resources to participate in the clean energy revolution.

In contrast, Kyoto avoids the question of equity by excluding poorer countries from targets and allowing emissions trading only among the industrialised nations that have signed up. Meyer is scornful of this approach. "You can't sell what you don't own," he points out. Emissions entitlements are the birthright of all human beings – part of our equal right to the use of the atmosphere. And Meyer certainly knows where denying equality can lead. His upbringing in apartheid South Africa gave him a penetrating insight into what can happen to a society – or a planet – in which a minority owns most of the resources.

From the African Union nations to the European Parliament, supporters are queuing up for C&C, and it may be only a matter of time before Kyoto's "Plan B" becomes the guiding principle at the UN climate negotiations. Indeed, it is difficult to visualise a final agreement that does not incorporate the basic principles of C&C. "Equity and survival" is the catchphrase of Meyer's organisation, the Global Commons Institute. If equity is implemented, future generations might well have Aubrey Meyer to thank for their survival.

Meyer realised that, as climate change affects the whole of humanity, it requires a species-level response