

VOLUNTARY INCOME TAX, VOLUNTARY SPEED LIMITS

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I am proud to be paying taxes in the United States. The only thing is I could be just as proud for half the money.
Arthur Godfrey

The best measure of a man's honesty isn't his income tax return. It's the zero adjust on his bathroom scale.
Arthur C. Clarke

Where there is an income tax the just man will pay more and the unjust less on the same amount of income.
Plato

If you steal \$10 from a man's wallet, you're likely to get into a fight. But if you steal billions from the commons, co-owned by him and his descendants, he may not even notice.
Walter Hickel

Recycling and speed limits are bullshit, they're like someone who quits smoking on his deathbed.
Chuck Palahniuk

I think the world is run by "C" students.
Al McGuire

Broder (2007) notes that the US position on global warming and climate is still markedly apart from most of the other developed countries, although its long overdue acknowledgment that climate change is a real problem has improved the US position slightly. Many years of ignoring, even challenging, the preponderance of scientific evidence has made many nations skeptical of the somewhat more enlightened US position. However, the biggest barrier, especially for European nations, is the US administration's insistence that any plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions be voluntary and devised by individual nations rather than as part of a worldwide treaty (Broder 2007). John Ashton, a special advisor on climate change to the British foreign secretary, called voluntary measures ineffective and remarked that dozens of nations had agreed to nonbinding goals for emission cuts in 1992; these same nations then watched pollutants linked to global heating rise at a double-digit percentile rate over the next decade. If nations believe that voluntary measures are suitable to avoid catastrophic climate change, why not have voluntary US income tax and voluntary speed limits? Any observant citizen knows the answer to this question, although many would favor these two voluntary measures. If the failure of a voluntary plan is evident, then why pursue such a hopeless cause?

The call for voluntary action on greenhouse gas emissions appears even less credible since the US House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform obtained documents that suggest the Bush administration has conducted a concerted behind-the-scenes lobbying campaign for generating opposition to California's request to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from that state's cars and trucks (Eilperin 2007). California's proposed greenhouse gas emissions standards would reduce emissions from their present levels. How can opposition to such a situation be understood?

Humankind has three urgent problems: (1) global climate change, (2) an energy crisis resulting from reaching peak oil, (3) exponential growth of the human population. No voluntary effort has arisen that appears likely to solve any of these problems before they reach major tipping points. Why obstruct any voluntary effort (California) that offers more promise than any other?

A laissez-faire solution to global climate change is very attractive to politicians because it is perceived as causing fewer short-term political problems. Many potential solutions (e.g., emissions standards and goals) seem absurd because humankind and its representatives are adept in avoiding solutions to serious long-term problems. Hardin (1993, p. 201) gives a blunt, and still appropriate, analysis of the situation:

Acknowledging the reality of the “greenhouse effect” and modifying human behavior to reduce its consequences will require changes in education and human economy throughout the world. We may fail; if so, we will surely be the first species to have foreseen its own demise.

This statement was made 14 years ago – plenty of time for voluntary remedial action – however, the situation has appreciably worsened. Worse yet, humankind is nearing one or more global tipping points, beyond which events will exceed effective human control. This moment is not a time for indecision! It is a time for decisive, all out, global coordinated effort with very specific goals and time framework. Both goals and times should be based on the preponderance of scientific evidence. This situation does not need multiple, uncoordinated meetings on the same problem, especially since US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice repeated US President George Bush’s insistence “that the solution could not starve emerging economies of fuel or slow the growth of advanced nations. Every country will make its own decisions, reflecting its own needs and interests” (Broder 2007). Nature neither waits while bureaucrats are indecisive nor is it affected by human obsession with exponential growth. Hubris and technology do not make humans immune to natural law. Brown (2007) remarks: “Nature has many thresholds that we discover only when it is too late. In our fast-forward world, we learn that we have crossed them only after the fact, leaving little time to adjust.”

How successful has voluntary action been in resolving some of humankind’s most intractable problems?

(1) Ecological overshoot

Ecological overshoot has been evident since the early 1980s, and nothing effective has been done to diminish this problem (<http://pnas.org/cgi/content/full/99/14/9266>). The dominant economic world view requires that all stakeholders be well informed. Even if they were, it is by no means certain that substantive effective action would be taken to eliminate ecological overshoot.

(2) Exponential population growth

Ecological overshoot demonstrates that resource consumption and human population size are not in balance. On a finite planet with finite resources, this imbalance should be abundantly clear. However, the addition of 1.5 million persons weekly does not seem to alarm people. Malthus studied this problem over 200 years ago, and voluntary measures have not only failed but the problem has worsened over the last century. For example, Jacques Diouf, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization Chief, warned that the global rise in cereal prices could lead to “social and political troubles” in developing nations (Staff Writers 2007). According to the UN, 800,000 persons on the planet go to bed hungry each night. Consequently, an already bad situation would worsen (<http://www.worldpopulationbalance.org/pop>).

(3) Peak oil

Over 90% of US energy comes from fossil sunlight (Congressman John Peterson, Pennsylvania; C-Span, 3 October 2007). Kohl (2007) calls attention to how vital fossil fuels have become in meeting the planet’s energy demands. Peak oil is either here or near, but the important point is that the era of “easy” oil is over and the era of “tough” oil is here. Most of the world’s oil is in politically unstable areas, and the remaining untapped supplies are primarily in small pockets that are difficult to access. Earth’s primary energy source is sunlight, and the “fossil sunlight” is being used very rapidly. Replacement of fossil energy will be difficult. For example, (a) 27 to 42 barrels of oil are needed to construct an average car, (b) construction of the average desktop computer requires more than 10 times its weight in fossil fuels, and (c) every calorie of food eaten in the United States requires roughly 10 calories of fossil fuels (Angel Research Staff 2007). Humankind should have already become aware of the consequences of peak oil since M. King Hubbert’s now classic publication in 1956 (Hubbert 1956). More recently, Heinberg (2005) argues persuasively that human society is headed for serious trouble in the near future. In the few years since Heinberg’s book was published, huge amounts of evidence have accumulated that confirm his analysis. Worse yet, humankind is still partying as if petroleum will last forever. Fortunately, some reassuring signs indicate that some parts of the world are moving in the right direction. For example, the province of Quebec enacted Canada’s first carbon tax on energy companies (Associated Press 2007), but this effort is not enough to reverse greenhouse gas emissions globally.

Fatal Disconnects

Humankind has a fatal disconnect with reality. The assumption that Earth is a vast cornucopian paradise with unlimited resources is a fantasy. The belief that the human population can grow forever on a finite planet and always have adequate resources is delusional, as is the belief that global problems (e.g., global heating) can be solved by voluntary action. When these beliefs and expectations prove to be unrealistic, a period of stunned disbelief occurs, followed by a period of finding someone to blame. Finally, humankind may realize that expectations are far greater than Earth can fulfill and that everyone is responsible for letting this situation occur. One hopes that the next step will not be increasingly violent resource wars, but rather a much more austere lifestyle with limited resources shared equitably and fairly.

Probably the first amenities to disappear will be energy and water supplies. These two are closely linked problems since biofuels (e.g., corn) require 1,000 tons of water to produce a ton of grain. Recent evidence indicates that biofuels production, except with sugar cane, may be contributing to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions (Quitério 2007). Very few people have ever heard of peak oil, and many who have think biofuels will fill the gap left as petroleum become increasingly scarce. They will not abandon their carefree, high-mileage habits voluntarily, nor will they willingly limit family size to match Earth's carrying capacity. High per capita energy use is regarded as a "right." I reluctantly conclude that the default position will be brutal and effective natural law, which will limit resource use to match carrying capacity, unless humans finally use their vaunted intelligence to avoid such a catastrophic event.

A Comparison of Two Nations

China and the United States are the major emitters of greenhouse gases globally, and both have, in practice, different systems of coping with the environmental stressors that are endangering both the biospheric life support system and their citizens. Pan Yue, a vice minister of China's State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) warned in 2005: "The [economic] miracle will end soon because the environment can no longer keep pace. . . . China's rapid development, often touted as an economic miracle, has become an environmental disaster" (as quoted by Economy 2007). Economy (2007) further notes that "China's leaders are worried about the environment's impact upon the economy." However, Beijing has structured its environmental protection efforts in much the same way it has pursued economic growth: by granting local authorities and factory owners wide decision-making power and by actively courting the international community and Chinese non-governmental organizations for their expertise while carefully monitoring their activities. Economy (2007) also notes that SEPA operates with barely 300 full-time employees in the capitol and only a few hundred throughout the country. In contrast, the US Environmental Protection Agency has a staff of almost 9,000 in the capitol city of Washington, DC, alone. Economy (2007) remarks that China's highly decentralized system has meant limited progress: only 7 to 10% of China's more than 660 cities meet the standards required to receive the designation of "National Model Environmental City" from SEPA. Economy's (2007) superb article has many examples of other failures to control environmental pollution.

Thornton (2006) notes that, after 28 years of reform, China faces challenges of an unprecedented scale, complexity, and importance. China has already liberalized its markets, but now its leaders and people must deal with popular dissatisfaction with local government, environmental degradation, scarce natural resources, an underdeveloped financial system, an inadequate health care system, a restless rural population, urbanization on a massive scale, and increasing social inequality. In addition, the energy crisis resulting from reaching peak oil could be added.

Thornton (2006) notes that China's three decades of reform have made undertaking new reforms more difficult and further remarks that the structure of the country's bureaucracy stifles initiative and promotes mediocrity. Worse yet, he feels that many officials, from the village to the central government, are corrupt and are eroding the government's effectiveness and feeding popular discontent with the system. He concludes that only by freeing its managers and leaders from the shackles of organizational politics and old-line thinking will China be able to find a dynamic but stable path toward the democratic future aspired to by an ever-larger number Chinese citizens.

By leaving conformity up to local officials and organizations, Beijing has, de facto, made compliance with national and global (e.g., greenhouse gas emissions) pollution control goals and standards optional. In short, persons with inadequate scientific credentials are making decisions that degrade not only the local environment but also the biospheric life support system. This process is no way to address global problems already having major deleterious effects upon human society.

The United States and China share a major obsession that overrides the differences in the two nations – the dedication to and belief in exponential economic growth. During his successful election campaign, former US President Clinton proclaimed "It's the economy, stupid!" Since then, President Bush, now in office, has stated more than once that nothing that interferes with the economy will be done in addressing climate change.

In both China and the United States, citizens want the government to do more about climate change and other environmental problems. Many polls show that citizens in the United States want involvement in the civil war in Iraq to end, which would free funds for alternative energy, health care, pollution control, and a variety of other domestic issues. An excerpt from Bruce Levine's (2007) book *How to Find Morale, Energy, and Community in a World Gone Crazy* delves into the roots of depression and links the increasingly consumer-based culture and standard-practice psychiatric treatments to worsening depression, instead of solving it. In addition, political appointees with few or no scientific credentials have been altering scientific reports from government agencies, particularly those addressing human-caused components to climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports, although viewed as overly conservative by many scientists, provide much evidence for remedial and preventative action by governments. If China and the United States fail to make major changes in present policies, altering present climate change trends will have little chance of being successful.

Conclusions

The title of this commentary is intended to illustrate that some individuals will not be voluntarily socially responsible. Nations also have their particular agendas, such as the US administration's insistence that any plan to reduce greenhouse gases be voluntary. Corporations perceive that they would have to diminish their profit goals and place social responsibility before profit. Some corporations might place social responsibility first, but they might lose their competitive edge. Globalization has made corporations more influential than ever in national politics, and relentless advertising has markedly affected consumer choices. In the United States, consumers now demand protection against imported toys painted with toxic substances. Some sort of social contract that benefits all of humankind is essential, and, sad to say, too much reliance on voluntary compliance often fails.

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