

Greenhouse and All That

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We know, with the certainty of conventional wisdom, that carbon dioxide (CO₂) build-up is warming the globe. Further, we know that this so-called greenhouse effect will cause sea levels to rise inundating coastal populations and cause climatic change. Or do we? No one that I know can cite the quantitative evidence which is needed to support the thesis. Annual mean temperatures fluctuate and climatic trends fluctuate, and so far, the tides have risen only millimetres, if at all. Yet, we embrace costly plans to reduce CO₂.

Similarly, we know that chlorinated fluorocarbons (CFCs) from refrigerators have made "holes" in the ozone layer. We know---don't we?---these holes let in cancer-forming ultra-violet sunlight. Yet few of us are using more sun cream nor invested in milliners' or hatters' businesses. In fact, I know of no one who claims to have purchased an additional hat. People, who do not spend an additional cent of their own money shielding themselves from ultra violet rays, nonetheless urge the government to ban CFCs. The green movement has authoritarian overtones.

The theme has become less fashionable, but haven't we known for some time that acid rain is destroying Europe's forests? Yet, a forester friend, who knows a great deal about trees, assures me that the Black Forest is in pretty good shape---Australian die-back looks like a more serious problem.

In 1865 William Jevons argued that a shortage of coal would stop industrial civilisation in its tracks. A hundred years later, the Club of Rome produced a computer model which convinced us we were about to run out of 'non-renewable' resources. There was an energy shortage, it is true, but it was followed by an energy glut. With hindsight, all that can be learned from the Club of Rome's antics is the truth of the computer programmers' best known aphorism: Garbage in; garbage out. But, at the time, we took the Club seriously and many countries compounded minor problems in the energy market by appointing authoritarian energy commissars who temporarily created queues at petrol pumps.

During the period between the 1940s and the 1970s the world experienced a slight cooling. Then we 'knew' we were

heading for another ice age. We know that nuclear energy is likely to destroy the human species and several more beside. Since Malthus raised the issue in the 1820s, the 'knowledge' that population growth will lead to mass starvation has ebbed and flowed. In point of fact, there was already mass starvation in 1820 and there still is, but, in spite of the greenies' attacks on agricultural chemicals, the situation is getting better. There is no end to the things we know that ain't so.

The apocalypse is always just around the corner. Since the wrath of God became unfashionable, natural agents have replaced supernatural agents and the State has replaced the Church. But the cost of singing the 23rd Psalm standing on your head in a tub of water has not changed---the State is, however, better able to make you do it.

Decisions to ban CFCs, cutting back on motor car usage, not using nuclear energy and agricultural chemicals, and so on, all impose costs which, in themselves, reduce living standards. Sometimes the cost may be high---for instance our refrigerated foods currently depend on CFCs. Sometimes, where human life is itself marginal, marginal increases in costs result in death. It is hard to escape the conclusion that upper-middle-class greenies place little value on the lives of poor people.

Many greenies would respond that the long-run increase in living standards brought about by restricting CFCs etc. now will be more than enough to justify the cost. That could be; but where is the evidence?

Greenies point to cases where man has changed his environment in ways which, with hindsight, he regrets---two cases in point are the deserts in North Africa, where the Romans once grew grain, and the radical changes to Australian flora induced by the Aboriginal practice of burning. And, what is more, as technology develops, man is able to change his environment even more rapidly. Nevertheless, in spite of such cases, environmental catastrophes have tended not to be man made. It is up to those who ask governments to ban and regulate to convince us that they are not crying wolf.

So scant is the hard evidence and so often do the doomsayers shift ground that I wonder whether many leading greens are not more interested in centralised authority than the natural environment. Is the green movement, perhaps, a refuge for coercive utopians who are currently fleeing socialism? In politics, green does tend to turn pink. I do not often hear calls for the preservation of lovely things by selling or giving them to loving owners---i.e. by privatising them?

Perhaps coercive greenyism will also run its course. I have recently read two accounts of the greenhouse effect by people who are obviously concerned about the environment. One is by Shaw and Stroup and published in "National Review" of July 14. The other is a book, "Nuteeriat" by David Noel,

published by Cornucopia Press. Both publications see the greenhouse effect as something of a manufactured crisis.

Shaw and Stroup ask what confidence can we have in global warming predictions when we note that less than 15 years ago the idea that another ice age was pending was popular enough for a book, "The Cooling", to receive respectful scientific attention. Noel makes three points the doomsayers should answer. First: he claims that the amount of carbon removed from the air as carbonates to form solid rock by such mechanisms as coral reefs, molluscs and direct solution of CO₂ in sea water far exceeds that tied up in plant life. Second: that increased atmospheric CO₂ will enhance plant growth and even cause something of a farming bonanza. Third: he claims that man's influence on the temperature of the planet is insignificant.

Of course, these people also might be wrong. But, before we give governments the power to do any more damage to the world economy, let us be reasonably sure that there really is a crisis in the ecosystem, and that the action proposed has NET benefits.

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