

Washington Can Lead: Unwashed Version

26 October 2016

James Hansen

The editors of The Seattle Times did a good job with my 20 October [op-ed](#) , placing it under the following title and sub-head:

Washington can lead on climate change by passing I-732

To provide an example for other states and the rest of the world – but most of all for young people, future generations and nature – vote yes on I-732

Washington State, thanks to the hard work of a small group of people, has a chance to push the nation, and thus the world, toward a common sense approach to stabilizing climate.

Cosmos, Sophie and I (actually Sophie's mother, Kiki) made a [2-minute video](#) to help explain it.

However, the editors made two changes to the [unwashed \(submitted\) version of my op-ed](#). You may think I am nitpicking, at first glance, but these changes hit upon some fundamental matters:

(1) The word “bribes” in the following paragraph of my op-ed was changed to “politics”.

So why did nations from Australia to Europe and states such as California adopt an ineffectual bureaucratic cap-and-trade system? In a word: **bribes**. Seven years ago, then Senator John Kerry admitted to me that fee-and-dividend was better, but, he said, in words that still ring in my ears, “I can't get one vote for that.” Instead, liberals pushed for Waxman/Markey cap-and-trade, with every vote bought and paid for by giveaways to special interests, the bill stretching to over 2000 pages.

I tried in more than a dozen countries to persuade politicians of the need for a simple across-the-board (oil/gas/coal) rising carbon fee with all money given to the public. That is the approach that could stick, could be accepted by conservatives and liberals, with the potential to go global. I initially attributed the difficulty of achieving this in the U.S. to the large number of climate deniers, politicians who are well-oiled and coal-fired. However, as I will clarify and quantify in “Sophie's Planet,” comparable blame rests upon politicians of both political parties.

Right-wing collaboration with the fossil fuel industry is obvious, but connivance of liberals is widespread. Soon after Dick Gephardt retired as the Democratic leader in the U.S. House of Representatives he began receiving \$120,000 per quarter from Peabody coal for lobbying, almost half a million dollars per year from a single source. Once elected, our representatives feel entitled to become part of an elite class. They are intelligent people, who support political perspectives that they think are good, but their personal well-being plays a big role.

Washington is broken. The system in Washington is rotten to the core. Sophisticated bribery reigns. The pharmaceutical industry, the big banks, the fossil fuel industry, and so on, all work

the system with impunity. Politicians understand this and many may have qualms, but they feel overwhelmed and have succumbed to the situation. This business is so ingrained in Washington that a Presidential candidate sees nothing wrong in accepting \$250,000 from big banks for a single talk. Campaign finance reform was once talked about seriously, championed by John McCain, a potential standard-bearer, as a true, indeed remarkable, American war hero. One of the most disappointing political developments in my life was McCain's ditching of campaign finance for the sake of party support of his Presidential nomination. Perhaps he thought that once elected he might come back to support this most fundamental matter.

The two-party system in Washington is now rotten to the core. Papering over this situation as simply "politics," as the Washington Times editors did, is wrong and dangerous.

Democracy is alive. Indeed, it is our best hope. But we stand at a dangerous point in history. The public knows enough about the Washington mess that it will not tolerate it much longer. The old cleansing action, throwing out one party for the other, no longer works. Both parties are infected. If an alternative does not arise, public anxiety may produce dangerous extremism.

That is why, in *Sophie's Planet*, I argue that we must allow more than two parties to compete. The public is so fed up with the two ruling parties that a "Revolutionary" party could compete effectively while taking no funds from special interests. However, the current electoral situation in the U.S. is rigged to prevent success of a third party.

The reason I mention this here is the existence of another important ballot initiative in the current elections, in Maine, for what is called "ranked" or "instant runoff" voting. In this system you are allowed to vote for several candidates in rank order, eliminating the chance that you lose your vote on a minor party candidate with little chance of winning.

Say there are five candidates for President. A voter ranks them in order of preference (or, foolishly, votes for only his #1 choice). If a candidate gets more than 50% of the votes as #1 choice, he/she is the winner. However, commonly none of them gets 50%. In that case, the candidate receiving the least number of votes is eliminated from consideration, and the vote of anybody who voted for that candidate instead becomes a vote for their #2 choice. If still no candidate has more than 50%, the second lowest vote-getter is eliminated, and so on.

This system would allow the best people in our country to run for the Presidency. Presently how many people are willing and able to go through the nomination procedures of the two parties? Minor parties do not attract the best people either, because who wants to simply be a "spoiler"?

Ranked voting should be a major plank of the Revolutionary Party, but ranked voting could, and may need to, precede the rise of an effective third party. People who love our country, who want to pull it back from the brink of disaster, to make government responsible to the people again, would do well to take ranked voting as an urgent cause. This might be achieved quickly if young people would get behind it. But laws need to be changed, so some state needs to set an example.

(2) The editors also eliminated the phrase “I-732 lacks the clear transparency and reproducibility of pure fee-and-dividend”. Perhaps they thought that omission made my plea for support of I-732 stronger. However, I want it to be clear that, although I-732 is the closest proposed law to a simple honest carbon fee and dividend, a good example for other states and nations of a nearly revenue-neutral rising carbon fee, the national fee-and-dividend should be simpler, with 100% of the money collected from the fossil fuel industry distributed uniformly to the public.

That is the only way the public will allow the fee to continue to rise. The fossil fuel companies will pass the cost on to customers, but the person doing better than average in limiting fossil fuel use will make money. Most people will come out ahead. Wealthy people, with bigger houses, more travel and a larger carbon footprint, will lose money, but they can afford it. The net effect is a strong incentive for consumers, business people, and entrepreneurs to find ways to replace fossil fuel energy with clean energy and energy efficiency. Economic studies show that, unlike a tax, which depresses the economy, a revenue neutral carbon fee spurs the economy, increases GNP, produces millions of jobs, and is by far the fastest fossil fuel phasedown. In contrast, cap-and-trade is designed to allow favors, offsets, and never would or should be trusted by the public. And tax swaps in our nation’s capital are fodder for special interests, not the public’s interest.

Some liberals object to my suggestion that the dividend (which can be distributed electronically at almost no cost to bank accounts or debit cards) should go only to legal residents. Liberal states that do not want to give priority to encouraging residents to become legal would of course be free to distribute to all residents, if they so choose. If a pathway to citizenship exists, my suggestion would be to give the dividend to those who have at least applied to that pathway.

The most fundamental reason for maintaining the integrity of fee-and-dividend is the fact that the alternative, cap-and-trade, cannot be made both global and effective. How can you achieve individual caps on 190 countries that add up to a stable climate that does not guarantee future loss of all coastal cities? What is the cap on India?

In every country that I visited and in every state that proffers their plan for cap-and-trade, the politicians drool over the money. They say the money is needed for good social services, and they mean it. But that approach is also a setup for business-as-usual bribes.