

New York Times Magazine

Tomorrow's NY Times Magazine article (The Civil Heretic) on Freeman Dyson includes an unfortunate quote from me that may appear to be disparaging and ad hominem (something about bigger fish to fry). It was a quick response to a reporter* who had been doggedly pursuing me for an interview that I did not want to give. I accept responsibility for the sloppy wording and I will apologize to Freeman, who deserves much respect.

You might guess (correctly) that I was referring to the fact that contrarians are not the real problem – it is the vested interests who take advantage of the existence of contrarians.

There is nothing wrong with having contrarian views, even from those who have little relevant expertise – indeed, good science continually questions assumptions and conclusions. But the government needs to get its advice from the most authoritative sources, not from magazine articles. In the United States the most authoritative source of information would be the National Academy of Sciences.

The fact that the current administration in the United States has not asked for such advice, when combined with continued emanations about “cap and trade”, should be a source of great concern. What I learned in visiting other countries is that most governments do not want to hear from their equivalent scientific bodies, probably because they fear the advice will be “stop building coal plants now!” These governments are all guilty of greenwash, pretending that they are dealing with the climate problem via “goals” and “caps”, while they continue to build coal plants and even investigate unconventional fossil fuels and coal-to-liquids.

I will send out something (“Worshiping the Temple of Doom”) on cap-and-trade soon. It is incredible how governments resist the obvious (maybe not so incredible when lobbying budgets are examined, along with Washington's revolving doors). This is not rocket science. If we want to move toward energy independence and solve the climate problem, we need to stop subsidizing fossil fuels with the public's money and instead place a price on carbon emissions.

My suggestion is Carbon Fee and 100% Dividend, with a meaningful starting price (on oil, gas and coal at the mine or port of entry) equivalent to \$1/gallon gasoline (\$115/ton CO₂). Based on 2007 fuel use, this would generate \$670B/year – returned 100% to the public (monthly electronic deposit in bank accounts or debit cards), the dividend would be \$3000 per adult legal resident, \$9000/year per family with two or more children. This is large enough to affect consumer product and life style choices, investments and innovations. Of course all the other things (rules re vehicle, appliance and building efficiencies, smart electric grid, utility profit motives, etc.) are needed, but a rising carbon price is needed to make them work and move us most efficiently to the cleaner world beyond fossil fuels.

* The reporter left the impression that my conclusions are based mainly on climate models. I always try to make clear that our conclusions are based on #1 Earth's history, how it responded to forcings in the past, #2 observations of what is happening now, #3 models. Here is the actual note that I sent to the reporter after hanging up on him:

I looked up Freeman Dyson on Wikipedia, which describes his views on "global warming" as below. If that is an accurate description of what he is saying now, it is actually quite reasonable (I had heard that he is just another contrarian). However, this also indicates that he is under the mistaken impression that concern about global warming is based on climate models, which in reality play little role in our understanding -- our understanding is based mainly on how the Earth responded to changes of boundary conditions in the past and on how it is responding to on-going changes.

If this Wikipedia information is an accurate description of his position, then the only thing that I would like to say about him is that he should be careful not to offer public opinions about global warming unless he is willing to first take a serious look at the science. His philosophy of science is spot-on, the open-mindedness, consistent with that of Feynman and the other greats, but if he is going to wander into something with major consequences for humanity and other life on the planet, then he should first do his homework -- which he obviously has not done on global warming. My concern is that the public may assume that he has -- and, because of his other accomplishments, give his opinion more weight than it deserves.

Jim Hansen