

Speaking Truth to Power – and to Friends

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Sometimes it's easier to speak truth to power than to speak truth to friends – I refer not to friends you know well, but to compatriots fighting for the same good cause.

Once when I was giving a public talk at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, where I was about to be presented an award by Governor Brown, who was sitting in the front row, I described California's newly minted cap-and-trade program as [“half-baked” and “half-assed”](#). I admit to being tactless, but it got his attention, which was my intention.

Golden Opportunities. Governor Brown is a smart man. Based on our discussions over dainties before my talk and another discussion after the ceremony, I believe he may realize that he missed a golden opportunity. California is one place that could have demonstrated an approach to the energy & climate problem that could have a huge national and global impact.

There is a crying need for some place, preferably a place that is reasonably large, to demonstrate an energy & climate approach with the potential to go global, an approach designed to allow amplifying feedbacks that lead to rapid phase-out of fossil fuels as the price of fossil fuels becomes honest. The only proposed system with those characteristics is a simple transparent revenue neutral carbon fee/tax. For the sake of spurring the economy and broad public support, the funds should be distributed 100% to the public, an equal amount to all legal residents.

A simple across-the-board national carbon fee/tax¹ can promptly be near-global via border duties on products from countries that do not have an equivalent fee. But why bug the Governor after his horse is out of the barn? California, Oregon & Washington, are well-suited to show the world a system that works, designed for the public, not for special interests – and they still could.²

Obama's Situation. Admittedly, President Obama is limited in what he can do domestically in his two remaining years. This fix is his own doing. He started with 70% popularity and both houses of Congress controlled by his party. His campaign had noted our “planet in peril”, and he had economic, energy security, and national security reasons to give priority to the matter. But it seems no one had the gumption to pound on his desk about the urgency and the nature of what was needed. I could not find anyone in his administration to even deliver [my letter](#) to him.

Who does he listen to? It is not pleasant to blame anyone. However, the fact is that Big Green, ~\$100M/year environmental organizations, has ready access to the President. Big Green, heavily staffed with lawyers and public relations people, has political clout because they can deliver votes. Unfortunately, Big Green has demonstrated little understanding of the global energy and climate matter and has become one of the biggest obstacles to solving the climate problem.

Big Green had a big impact on the U.S. Administration in the 1990s, deserving much “credit” for the Kyoto cap-and-trade-with-offsets, which led to sharply accelerated global carbon emissions.

¹ It's a fee if the money is distributed 100 percent to the public; it's a tax in those countries where the government takes the money to make itself bigger and more intrusive.

² These states have tremendous potential for innovation and technology development. If there were a rising carbon fee, low-carbon and no-carbon technology development would surge. And the people in those states have strong love and concern for nature.

Now Big Green has used its access to persuade the President to use his authority to issue as many domestic regulations as possible. There will be plenty of work for the lawyers. There should be a modest reduction of U.S. emissions, which is useful. This is about all that could be done domestically, given the situation. The approach provides some leverage for later bargaining.

Why bring this up now? Because of the global situation today, the reason we march tomorrow. We cannot allow international negotiations, culminating in Paris in December 2015, to yield a Kyoto-like debacle that again fails to address the real issue. Losing another decade or more would guarantee that young people and future generations inherit a situation out of their control.

Global Situation. The crucial requirement for phasing down fossil fuel emissions rapidly is to achieve an honest rising price on fossil fuels that incorporates their external costs to society.

But what do we hear from Washington? Nations should improve their emission goals and [caps](#)!

The Paris accord needs to include agreement that the path to climate stabilization requires a rising carbon fee. Fees will be collected domestically, but can be verified. Agreement by China, the United States, and Europe would be sufficient to assure near-global participation.

A rising carbon fee alone is not sufficient. But it is the sine qua non. New carbon-free technologies are required. But no policies can spur technologies fast enough without the underlying incentives, for the public, businesses, and entrepreneurs, of a rising carbon fee.

Global agreement on a carbon fee must be approved at home. It must be of a nature that can receive broad public and political support. That brings me to my main point.

Speaking Truth to Friends. Conservatives are not the enemy of the planet. Historically they are its best friend. Conservation and creation care are in the blood of most conservatives.

The political divide occurs because conservatives fear that liberals will use the climate issue to increase taxes and government intrusion. Policy prescriptions proposed by liberals stoke those concerns and provide fertile ground for anti-science nut-cases to flourish.

Most conservatives I have met are thoughtful. They do not want to go down in history as being responsible for blocking effective action to stabilize climate. Gaining their support for a rising revenue-neutral carbon fee, which is in fact a conservative approach, is possible.

Approval of a rising carbon fee during the next few years is crucial. It is also feasible. Climate events should help. Although the U.S. has been cool this year, global temperature in 2014 is likely to be the warmest year in the data record. And 2015 should break that record. Extreme climate events are likely to become more noticeable during the next several years.

Most marchers tomorrow will be liberals. The truth they must face is the fact that prescriptive liberal policies have no chance of solving the global climate problem.

Citizens Climate Lobby advocates carbon fee and 100% dividend. Founder Marshall Saunders espouses respect and love for political opponents of a carbon fee, and repeated engagement. CCL is bipartisan and growing rapidly, but it needs more volunteers (CitizensClimateLobby.org).

People's March. Anniek and I, our daughter, and three grandchildren will march tomorrow with Citizens Climate Lobby, assembling on West 72nd Street. We would welcome and appreciate the support of any marchers who have not decided yet which group to join.