



Figure 1. High Schoolers for Carbon Dividends.

Can Young People Save Democracy and the Planet?

8 October 2021

James Hansen

Communications from young people give me optimism. Potential leaders among young people seem to have an ability to see the forest for the trees regarding climate change policy, a desire to follow the data, and a recognition of the need to address political polarization.

Last year, as described in [Student Leadership on Climate Solutions](#), I was excited to learn that more than 350 college student government presidents – representing more than 4 million students in all 50 states – issued a bipartisan statement in support of carbon fee and dividend.

They said they were following the science – climate, energy and economic sciences – showing that the fastest route to a global climate solution starts with a simple, honest, domestic carbon fee with border duties on products from countries without an equivalent fee. Fee-and-dividend is not the be-all-to-end-all – it's the underlying requirement to make other policies work fast.

Now I am thrilled to read an [op-ed](#) written by two high school students, Siddharth Tiwari and Nicholas Snyder, announcing the launch of [High Schoolers for Carbon Dividends](#), a bipartisan initiative co-founded by more than 700 high school leaders from all 50 states.

Economic studies show that putting 100 percent of the funds immediately into the hands of the public spurs the economy, creates millions of jobs, and increases GNP and government revenue. This approach also supports social justice. Most low- and middle-income people make money with Fee & Dividend; wealthy people lose money, due to their large carbon footprint, but they can afford it. Indeed, if the IRS does not send dividends to the 10% of citizens with highest income (>\$400,000), the dividend for the other 90% increases by 11%. If the 20% with highest incomes (>\$150,000) receive no dividend, the dividend for the other 80% increases by 25%.¹

Congress could include fee & dividend in the budget reconciliation bill – they are considering it – at almost zero cost. The U.S. would be on the way to lead the world toward a climate solution.

Wait a minute! What's wrong with this picture?

It seems too good to be true. There must be a catch. Something waiting in the wings of our dysfunctional government that will crush the hopes of young people again.

Yes, monsters wait in the wings, but it is feasible to slay the monsters. That's why I put completion of the final three chapters of *Sophie's Planet* on ice for a bit, especially *Chapter 49: Equal Rights and Opportunity*. I want to see what the Biden Administration does in the next few months; I also want to know the outcome of COP26, even though the bar is low for COP26.

How can I say that democracy is at stake? One of the monsters is the extreme polarization that has developed in our politics, which has made Washington dysfunctional. The polarization monster is the offspring of an older, bigger monster: the legalized bribery in Washington that allows special interests to buy favors from Congresspeople.

The extreme polarization has not only made Washington dysfunctional. It also creates strong political oscillations in the nation. The next oscillation – conceivably – could destroy our democratic system, replacing it with an autocracy.

Into this murky maelstrom step fresh-faced, fearless college and high school students (it will do your heart good to look at the photos of the hundreds of student leaders on the [HS4CD](#) and [S4CD](#) websites representing millions of students). They seem to recognize how fee & dividend deals a heavy blow to special interests, creating a level playing field for all carbon-free energies and energy efficiency. Fee & dividend is great for competition and innovation in the private sector. It's really bipartisan: solid conservative economic principles supporting a progressive agenda to address wealth disparity, while driving the fastest solution to the climate emergency.

Compare today to 2008-9. Then, we could not persuade the Obama administration or even green groups to support fee & dividend. They supported a cap-and-trade bill with thousands of pages of giveaways to almost every lobbyist in Washington. The bill was ineffectual and failed to pass.

Today, danger still looms in possible backroom deals, in which the money or part of the money from the carbon fee is stolen. In that case, the public does not get a full dividend. The public would object to rising fuel prices. Emissions would not fall as rapidly as practical.

But how is democracy at stake? Let me first give one of the examples in Chapter 49.²

In 2016, Cosmos (our black lamb) and Sophie (our oldest grandchild) made a 2-minute [video](#) with me to explain the merits of a Washington State carbon tax ballot initiative. I also wrote an [op-ed](#) for the Seattle Times. The editors tweaked my op-ed, but the tweaks were enough to cause me to write an emotional [essay](#)³ complaining about the changes.

The essay paints a picture of bribery that goes on in our nation's capital (the editors changed "bribery" to "politics"). For high school students who may not have been paying attention five years ago, the Presidential candidate then who thought there was nothing wrong with taking \$250,000 from big banks in return for luncheon remarks was Hilary Clinton. The one thing in the essay that I would change today is the suggested name of the third party: "Equal Rights and Opportunity" is a better description than the "Revolutionary" party.

The Washington State ballot initiative was for a revenue-neutral carbon tax, with most of the tax revenue used to reduce the sales tax. The sales tax is even more regressive than a carbon tax, so

the net effects would be a moderately progressive change in tax structure and a phasedown of carbon emissions. I was only lukewarm about this tax switch approach, so I noted in my op-ed that fee & dividend was a better approach – but the editors deleted that statement.

Jeff Tannenbaum suggested that we try additional measures to generate public support for the ballot initiative (Jeff is a sustainability advocate who has done more than anyone I know to reduce U.S. carbon emissions.⁴) Polls suggested that the initiative had only about 40% support, but that may have been because environmental groups had come out against it! This seemed to be a misunderstanding of the initiative's effect. Jeff suggested that I explain the benefits to some well-known personalities and try to get them to come out in support of the initiative.

The way it worked was: Jeff would draft a memo, I would change it to my own words and send it to a contact, who would forward it to a given celebrity. I didn't realize what I was getting into. Each morning when I turned my computer on – thinking that I would do science – there were more suggestions from Jeff. The polls in Washington State were getting a little better. Then one evening Van Jones – on the Bill Maher show – said he was headed to Seattle, where he would torpedo the ballot initiative! There must be a misunderstanding. There should be no competition between a carbon fee and social justice goals, if the revenues are distributed 100% to the public.

Van Jones agreed to a telecon. After introductions, I began to explain the merits of carbon fee and dividend, but after just a few sentences Van Jones interrupted, declaring that I was “condescending and a racist.” He gave an impassioned description of the needs for social justice, and ended by saying that we should start our climate policy planning from scratch and the needs of the social justice community should come first. He did not want to hear more about fee & dividend or the ballot initiative, and the phone call ended.

Jeff and I were temporarily stunned. It seemed to me that the problem – again – was my poor communication abilities. The biggest economic winners with fee & dividend are low-income people, especially those in urban areas, because of their moderate carbon footprints. Slowing and reversing climate change will also especially benefit communities that are being hurt the most by climate change. Finally, economic studies show that fee & 100 percent dividend will increase GNP and tax revenues, thus providing the revenue for programs that are needed for the sake of social justice, e.g., universal pre-K education and free 2-year community college.⁵

But how is democracy at stake, darn it? Democracies are not inherently stable, especially two-party democracies. In fact, most democracies – especially in the United States – are not functioning as true democracies, because of the role of money in our politics. One U.S. Senator agreed with me that fee & dividend was the best foundation for a climate policy, but, he said, “I can't get one vote for that.” Instead, it is necessary to buy each vote for any bill by allowing each Congressperson to include favors for the special interests that they are indebted to.⁶

The public is frustrated with our government(s) and their machinations. The situation is particularly dangerous in the United States. Although one party nominally has control of all three branches of government today, the government is not focused on passing the fundamental reforms that are needed. There is danger of extreme reaction of the public at the next election.

The college and high school students are emphasizing the need for bipartisanship. How can that be achieved in our present almost broken system? In chapter 49 of *Sophie's Planet*, I suggest

that young people think about the potential of a third party, one focused on equal rights and opportunity – the government reforms and policies needed to achieve those goals.

I do not suggest the sort of third parties that have been tried in the U.S., which mainly were ego-driven parties or single-issue parties. Most Americans still believe that it is possible to have a country that continually strives toward the goal of equal rights and opportunity for all.

It would be better to have the party in full control over whether it runs a presidential candidate, with final decision as late as possible. It may be best to focus first on electing congressional representatives and on achieving widespread ranked voting.⁷ Even a small number of representatives in Congress could have an influence out of proportion to their numbers.

Young people should not underestimate their power. I was dragged out of focusing totally on climate science by young people who were enthused about the candidacy of Barack Obama. Their support was crucial to his overtaking of Clinton in the primaries and winning the election. The fundamental problems did not get fixed, but I don't think that we should blame one person.

As you have probably guessed, I'm a political Independent. That's useful for science, because it's important not to let ideology affect scientific assessments. I have been attacked for decades by climate-deniers from the right, but I am equally distraught by the left, whose climate "solution" seems to be to dictate technologies – rather than objectives while harnessing the power of the private sector – and throw piles of money at the matter, borrowing the money from our children and grandchildren. You can ignore this last paragraph, if it is irritating – I will try to make the last chapters of *Sophie's Planet* as ideology-free as possible.

¹ For simplicity and equality, it seems preferable to give the dividend to everyone, but as long as the government is not allowed to steal the money, these compromises on the distribution will not reduce the effectiveness for climate.

² Hansen, J., Chapter 49: Equal Rights and Opportunity, *Sophie's Planet*, Bloomsbury, 2022.

³ Hansen, J., *Washington Can Lead: Unwashed Version*, communication available at www.Columbia.edu/~jeh1, 26 October 2016.

⁴ He developed innovative ways that have been widely adopted to finance retrofitting of buildings to improve energy efficiency. He also is responsible for development of some of the largest utility-scale solar power plants in the U.S.

⁵ In the current budget debate in the U.S. Congress the price tags assumed for universal pre-K and free junior college total \$0.3 trillion, less than 10% of the price tag for the entire package that the Democratic Party is pursuing.

⁶ Hansen, J., draft Chapter 44: [Tell the President the Whole Truth](#), *Sophie's Planet*, Bloomsbury, 2022.

⁷ In ranked voting, the voter lists all candidates in order of preference. If no candidate exceeds 50 percent first place votes, the candidate with the least votes is eliminated. People listing that candidate as their top choice are credited with their second choice, and the votes are retabulated. This is all done instantly, without need for a runoff election.