



They got you fighting a culture war to stop you from fighting a class war

(Credit: Jace Avery (@saddrivingsbyjace), Instagram, 1 Feb 2022,
described as “Phrase stolen from a piece of graffiti in San Antonio”)

Politics

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Science-based policies could successfully limit human-caused climate change, but when political parties are allowed to accept money from special interests, policies are distorted to the point of being ineffective. This is a solvable problem, but to clarify the situation and the needed actions, we need to first marshal the evidence. The draft Prologue of *Sophie's Planet* is intended to help coherently organize the evidence. Here is Part III of V, with the final two paragraphs of Part II.

Final two paragraphs of Prologue Part II for context:

This free speech hullabaloo led to a cornucopia of invitations to speak with energy and climate experts and government officials in a dozen countries. In three years, 2006-2008, I received a balanced education as I traveled with and made joint presentations with environmentalists, but also as I met utility CEOs and worked with their staffs (people charged with keeping the lights on), and made interactive presentations to oil and coal executives. NASA political leaders were often displeased with what they viewed as extracurricular activity, but I received encouragement from most NASA employees; and midlevel NASA lawyers made sure that my activity was always within my rights.

This intense period culminated in a workshop with energy experts to assess the actions needed to provide the energy required for high living standards, but in a way that preserved a healthy climate. We held the workshop on Capitol Hill in Washington so that congressional staffers could attend – on 3 November 2008, the day before the U.S. Presidential election. I felt that we had developed a good understanding of what was needed. The next evening, I was pleasantly exhausted as my wife Anniek and I settled down to watch election returns.

Prologue: Part III

Barack Obama, in winning that election, had a golden opportunity. His campaign included a promise to address climate change. His party won control of both houses of Congress. A global financial emergency required Congress to pass legislation that could include, at no cost, the main requirement to address climate change: a rising price on carbon emissions. A fee should be collected from fossil fuel companies at domestic mines and ports of entry, with all the funds distributed uniformly to citizens. Seventy percent of the public would get more in the dividend than they paid in increased prices. Wealthy people, who have large “carbon footprints,” would lose money, but they can afford it. I first called this “carbon tax and 100% dividend,” but soon simplified it to “carbon fee-and-dividend” or “fee-and-dividend.” Economists support this approach to address climate change, simplifying its name further to “carbon dividend.”¹

Al Gore called me after the election,¹ before Obama took office. He was preparing to meet with Obama to discuss climate policy, and was seeking suggestions. I had three. Most important, by far, was fee-and-dividend. Fee-and-dividend is the way, perhaps the only way, the public will allow a rising price on fossil fuels, as the monthly dividend more than offsets the rising cost of fuel for low-and-middle-income people. Fee-and-dividend is also the basis for global phasedown of carbon emissions, as a border duty would be collected on products made from fossil fuels arriving from countries that did not have an equivalent carbon fee or tax, thus encouraging most countries to have their own carbon fee, so they can collect the money themselves. Manufacturers would be given a rebate on products shipped to nations without a carbon fee, thus removing the cost added to their products by the domestic carbon fee and assuring fair competition.

My second suggestion was to ramp up RD&D (research, development and demonstration) of modern nuclear power. Otherwise, the firm (24/7) energy source complementing intermittent renewable energies for the next half-century would be fossil fuels, mainly gas. Nuclear power is potentially inexpensive, based on the cost of fuel and materials needed for a nuclear power plant, but it requires RD&D support to drive down the cost, just as subsidies drove down the cost of solar and wind power. I feared that nuclear power might be a hard sell, as Clinton/Gore had terminated R&D on nuclear power, claiming it was not needed. However, Gore now seemed to be open-minded: he said that he would host a meeting of experts to discuss nuclear power.

My third suggestion was to modernize the U.S. electricity grid, including backbone direct current lines to allow low-loss transmission of renewable energy to population centers. All three of these suggestions were discussed at our workshop the day before the election.

Would Gore actually take these suggestions to Obama? I began to worry. Gore seemed to agree with fee-and-dividend, but did not seem to appreciate its merits for national and global purposes. He said that he preferred to reduce payroll taxes instead of providing a dividend. However, half of adults are not on a payroll, many being retired or otherwise unemployed. Also, I doubted that Gore would suddenly flip to strong support of nuclear power, after he had long opposed it.

¹ The frostiness had ended in January 2006, during the free speech hullabaloo, when he invited me to lunch at the Regency Hotel on Park Avenue, as described in *Storms of My Grandchildren*. He began by offering an apology, but – darn it – I cut him off by saying there was nothing to apologize for, so I never found out what he intended to say.

So, I decided to try to get advice directly to Obama. I would write a letter, but first I was committed to take a “vacation” to London for meetings to encourage phaseout of British coal use, then on to the Hague to testify to a Dutch parliamentary commission, and to Sweden for an interfaith climate summit with religious leaders at Uppsala Cathedral. Anniek would go with me, visiting relatives in the Netherlands while I went to Sweden. She did not make it that far. As she rushed with me between London meetings, she felt discomfort that doctors diagnosed as a heart attack. They recommended an operation to insert a stent. As we waited for her to be able to fly, we wrote a letter on climate and energy policy to Michelle and Barack Obama.

How to deliver the letter? I sent it to Obama’s chosen Science Adviser, a Harvard professor. He declined to deliver the message, at least until after he was confirmed by the Senate, which would not be until the spring of 2009, by when it would be too late to alter Obama’s economic plans. Further, the Science Adviser wrote to me, he was “proscribed from discussing matters of policy with anybody other than Obama and his immediate team prior to my confirmation.” Really? That made no sense. Instead, he seemed to be saying “I will handle this, I don’t need your advice.”

Anniek says that some audience members look askance when I am introduced as a graduate of a midwestern university, rather than the Ivy League. I pooh-pooh that because in science your ability matters, not your school. However, perhaps educational pedigree mattered to Obama, as he chose a path out of the financial crisis that was a product of Ivy League elite and Wall Street. Obama blew his golden opportunity to affect the future of the planet.

Was effective, bipartisan, energy and climate policy possible? Yes, at least it once was, based on interactions that occurred two decades earlier. I briefly digress to events in 1989: Republican Senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania protected me from the wrath of John Sununu, President George H.W. Bush’s chief of staff, when Sununu was angered by my revelation that the White House altered my congressional testimony on climate change. Senator Heinz, after arguing that I was within my rights, invited me to a “town hall” with his constituents, where he made the case that fossil fuels were essential for a time, as they provided most of the energy supporting high living standards, but he also said that climate and pollution are valid issues that must be addressed in energy policies on appropriate time scales. Based on his remarks, I am confident that Senator Heinz² would have supported the actions that I recommended in 2008.

Reasons to believe that bipartisan energy and climate policy is possible are: (1) fee-and-dividend is based on solid, conservative, economic principles, which favor taxing things that must be reduced. The price of alternative energies should include their costs to society, thus enabling fair competition. (2) Most Republicans support nuclear power. Democrats have been unenthusiastic about nuclear power, but likely would support it as part of an effective bipartisan energy and climate program. (3) Both political parties agree on the need to modernize the electric grid.

However, we were in the Obama years. Al Gore had Obama’s ear. Did my suggestions persuade Gore of the merits of a potentially bipartisan approach? The first test was on 12 January 2009,

² Henry John Heinz III, heir to the H.J. Heinz Company, died in 1991 when his small plane, facing mechanical problems, collided with a helicopter inspecting the plane, killing everyone on the plane and helicopter. Heinz, an advocate for the environment, was viewed as a potential presidential candidate. During a dinner in Washington on 23 June 2008, the 20th anniversary of my Senate testimony, when I mentioned that Heinz may have been our last chance for a President who could lead bipartisan energy and climate policy, I saw tears in Teresa Heinz’s eyes. I suspect that she and John shared that objective; they were married 25 years. Teresa married John Kerry in 1995.

before Obama took office, when Gore held his promised meeting on nuclear power. I had NASA work that day, but Gore allowed me to send Tom Blees, a nuclear expert. The meeting began with a strong signal: Gore chose Amory Lovins (who says that energy efficiency and renewables are all that is needed) as first speaker, introducing him with effusive praise. I had made graphs showing that Lovins' energy projections bear no resemblance to the real world, but the focus seemed to be on vision, not on data. The clincher was that Gore scheduled Arjun Makhijani, a dedicated anti-nuclear crusader, to give the last talk. Gore's mind was already made up.

That is no reason to give up. The underlying policy need is fee-and-dividend. A cost-free rising carbon fee allows all clean energies, including nuclear energy, to compete, which is the efficient way to phase down fossil fuel use. Would Gore support fee-and-dividend? The answer came quickly, later in January, when Gore addressed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: he advocated the “cap-and-trade” scheme designed by big banks and big business. Carbon emission reductions in that scheme are marginal. Worse, cap-and-trade increases the public’s energy cost, with no off-setting dividend. This approach has no chance of growing into a global solution.

Still, there was another opportunity. Obama chose Senator John Kerry to lead the effort to sell Congress on climate legislation. I knew Kerry, mainly via his wife Teresa Heinz³ and her office. Kerry listened patiently as I described the simplicity and effectiveness of fee-and-dividend. It may be best, he said, “but I can’t get any votes for that.” The cap-and-trade bill being worked on was already more than 3,000 pages, mostly written by lobbyists for special interests. How to combat that? I wrote an op-ed, “Sack Goldman-Sachs Cap-and-Trade,” for the *New York Times*. I believe that you will find the story of the under-handed ways that the *Times* sabotaged that op-ed as maddening, but illuminating. Once the liberal media decide on a position, they become an enemy of free speech, restricting communication with the public.

Many authors of climate books paint a picture of a “war” with an evil fossil fuel industry. Sure, that industry, like others, tries to maximize its profits and, like others, it bribes governments. However, the public wants and still needs fossil fuels for some time. I hope to persuade you in *Sophie’s Planet* that – despite bad actors in the fossil fuel industry and those supporting that industry – the underlying problem lies elsewhere, and it is a solvable problem.

Policy oscillations increased with successive administrations. Growing oscillations can lead to system collapse, like the Tacoma Narrows Bridge when the frequency of the wind matched the natural vibration frequency of the bridge.² We can help avoid such collapse by recognizing the positive contributions of both political perspectives.

On one side, we can celebrate the success of renewable energy advocates. That industry is now poised to make a significant contribution to clean energy. However, the “green new deal” of the Biden administration was ill-conceived from the start. Why borrow from young people via deficit spending, fueling inflation and leaving a burden for future generations? Wind and solar industries were already cost competitive after decades of renewable portfolio standards. Carbon fee-and-dividend would have cost nothing and been far more effective in the long run. Instead, Biden added more subsidies and mandates, e.g., on vehicles, that were certain to create a long-lasting backlash. Aversion to control is a powerful force, especially in the United States.

³ I received the Heinz environment award in 2001. Interactions included lunch at Teresa’s house in Washington with Teresa, her sons, and John Kerry, and continuing communications via Teresa’s office.

On the other side, we should thank the people – some call themselves eco-modernists, others work quietly, without a label – who are shouldering the heavy work of undoing unjust prejudices that long prevented development of modern nuclear power. It is not easy when you look across the scrimmage line and see the fossil fuel industry and liberal media lined up on the other side. In the period 2006-2008, when I traveled with “environmentalists,” I was surprised by their open admission that they fought for rules to make nuclear power as expensive and slow as possible. They then argued that nuclear power is expensive and slow. Nuclear power will be cost effective, when governments support it as they have supported renewable energy. As for the time scale, phasedown of global emissions will not happen in a few years; it will require at least several decades. We need contributions of both renewables and modern nuclear power.

Each side poses a threat for young people, with potential to continue political oscillations that threaten system collapse. When the political left regains control of levers of power, if they again fail to support the basic policies needed to phase down carbon emissions, they will lock in more fossil fuel infrastructure that will not disappear for many decades. The political right is correct that abundant energy is needed to raise living standards worldwide, but the danger is their flippant attitude toward climate change. In effect, they say: “if 1.5°C global warming has only moderate effects, what is the big problem with 3°C?” Understandably, most of the public has no time to study and appreciate the threat posed by the climate system’s delayed response and amplifying feedbacks. Political and thought leaders have no such excuse.

¹ Hansen J. [Student Leadership on Climate Solutions](#). 31 July 2020, [Bipartisan Statement](#), [Economists’ Statement](#)

² [Tacoma Narrows Bridge](#), Wikipedia, last accessed 25 December 2025