

An Interview with Neal Mc Cluskey: Coal and Not Oil?

June 9, 2011 10:40 am

Michael F. Shaughnessy - The book is about the ways in which climate change alarmism has crept in – or should I say invaded? – numerous policy areas beyond science and the environment.

Michael F. Shaughnessy
Eastern New Mexico University
Portales, New Mexico

1) Neal, the Washington Post recently ran an article about the coal industry trying to sneak positive things about the coal industry into the schools. How did this come about ?

I'm not sure who proposed what to whom initially, but the impetus for the Post story seemed to be an effort by the publisher Scholastic to send free copies of a lesson plan called "The United States of Energy" to public schools. The publication was funded by the American Coal Foundation and was accused by several groups of delivering direct, coal industry propaganda to kids.

2) It is bad enough that gas prices are the way they are, but how influential is the coal industry in terms of curriculum?

I haven't explored the tentacles of the coal curriculum, but my sense is the industry is not very influential. In fact, as I lay out in a chapter in the new Cato book [*Climate Coup: Global Warming's Invasion of Our Government and Our Lives*](#), if anything the curricula students are getting on environmental issues – especially climate change – are likely to be very alarmist in nature. And who are the bad guys? Human beings generally, but especially those who trade in fossil fuels. That's not necessarily always the case – obviously, the coal industry is trying to get its own message to the kids – but alarmism seems to be more common than industry control.

3) Tell us about this new CATO book and what you are trying to clarify.

The book is about the ways in which climate change alarmism has crept in – or should I say invaded? – numerous policy areas beyond science and the environment. So my chapter deals with education, but there also chapters on trade, foreign policy, etc.

4) Neal, there are many people that I have interviewed that scoff at the concept of global warming. Indeed, I have had people say the opposite is true- that the climate is getting colder. Who should people believe or are all these people just theorizing?

I am light years from being a climatologist and certainly can't tell you who to believe on the subject, at not least based on in-depth climate research. What I can say, as a student of public choice theory, is that people are self-interested and will use government power for their own ends. When it comes to the climate change debate the people with power are generally the alarmists, and the way they accrete more power is proclaiming an ever-worsening crisis. So it appears that the hot-doom scenarios we hear from people like Al Gore, or James Hansen at NASA, are probably significantly overstated...but not totally off. Pat Michaels, Cato's resident climatologist and editor of the new volume, does not argue that there is no man-made global warming, but that it is not nearly as bad as we're being led to believe, and proposed public policy cures are likely to be far worse than the disease.

5) Funny story I have to share- apparently the British Parliament was concerned about Global Warming and all got together in those Houses of Parliament to discuss. Well, at the end of the day, they had all signed some form indicating concern, and left Parliament to go to their neighborhood pub and walked out into the streets of London to find it snowing, and bitter cold- the earliest snow in recorded history and the coldest day recorded. Well, as you might guess, the Press had a field day with this...your reaction?

First, all the climate scientists – and climate curricula I've read – will tell you that short-term weather tells you nothing about long-term trends. Unfortunately, many will then turn right around and tell you that any especially bad weather is a clear sign of the impending clima-pocalypse. So, I guess my reaction is that this anecdote proves that we are facing a global cooling crisis.

6) It seems that some groups are trying to force their propaganda down the throats of our children- who should be being taught to think critically. Your thoughts on this?

This is what's really key: All curricula are the products of people deciding what they think children should learn, and in public schools – barring complete uniformity of opinion among all citizens – the process for getting curricula to kids inherently involves coercion. So whether it's the coal industry, or NASA, or the Sierra Club pushing an energy curriculum, to get their lessons to kids they have to go through a system that forces all people to support the public schools, and forces people to exercise political power to get their preferred curricula implemented.

Interestingly, the result of this is sometimes the imposition of loaded curricula, but perhaps just as often complete avoidance of contentious issues. We see this very clearly with the seemingly endless Darwinism/creationism debate, with many teachers and schools simply skipping the topic altogether, and in Climate Coup I point to evidence that this avoision takes place with climate change as well. This might be the most disturbing part of my chapter, because as overblown as climate change fears might be, it is a legitimate issue that students should know about. Unfortunately, thanks to the inherently conflictual nature of public schooling, many will learn nothing about it at all.

7) Do you think schools might avoid teaching about oil, coal, or energy whatsoever as a result of pressure?

Absolutely, for the reasons I offer in the previous questions.

8) What have I neglected to ask?

I think you hit all the big stuff – thanks!