

THE MORAL LIBERAL

Earth Hour celebrates ignorance

By Ross McKittrick

April 1, 2015

~Its ideas would send the West back 100 years and keep poor nations impoverished and wretched~

A few years ago, a journalist asked me for my thoughts on the importance of “Earth Hour” – which was reprised this past weekend. What I told him applies today, perhaps even more so.

I abhor Earth Hour. Abundant, cheap electricity has been the greatest source of human liberation in the 20th century. Every material social advance in the 20th century depended on the proliferation of inexpensive and reliable electricity.

Giving women the freedom to work outside the home depended on the availability of electrical appliances that free up time from domestic chores. Getting children out of menial labour and into schools depended on the same thing, as well as on the ability to provide safe indoor lighting for reading.

Development and provision of modern health care without electricity is absolutely impossible. The expansion of our food supply, and the promotion of hygiene and nutrition, depended on being able to irrigate fields, cook and refrigerate foods, and have a steady indoor supply of safe hot water.

Many of the world’s poor suffer brutal environmental conditions in their own homes because of the necessity of cooking over indoor fires that burn twigs and dung. This causes local deforestation and the proliferation of smoke- and parasite-related lung diseases.

Anyone who wants to see local conditions improve in the Third World should realize the importance of access to cheap electricity from fossil-fuel based power generating stations. After all, that’s how the West developed.

The whole mentality around Earth Hour demonizes electricity. I cannot do that. Instead, I celebrate it and all that it has provided for humanity. Earth Hour celebrates ignorance, poverty and backwardness.

By repudiating the greatest engine of liberation, it becomes an hour devoted to anti-humanism. It encourages the sanctimonious gesture of turning off trivial appliances for a trivial amount of

time, in deference to some ill-defined abstraction called “the Earth,” all the while hypocritically retaining and enjoying the real benefits of continuous, reliable electricity.

People who see virtue in doing without electricity should shut off their fridge, stove, microwave, computer, water heater, lights, TV and all other appliances for a month, not an hour. And pop down to the cardiac unit at the hospital and shut the power off there, too.

I don't want to go back to nature. Travel to a zone hit by earthquakes, floods and hurricanes to see what it's like to go back to nature. For humans, living in “nature” meant a short life span marked by violence, disease and ignorance. People who work for the end of poverty and relief from disease are fighting against nature. I hope they leave their lights on.

Here in Ontario, through the use of pollution control technology and advanced engineering, our air quality has dramatically improved since the 1960s, despite the expansion of industry and the power supply. If, after all this, we are going to take the view that the remaining air emissions outweigh all the benefits of electricity, and that we ought to be shamed into sitting in darkness for an hour, like naughty children who have been caught doing something bad, then we are setting up unspoiled nature as an absolute, transcendent ideal that obliterates all other ethical and humane obligations. No thanks.

I like visiting nature, but I don't want to live there, and I refuse to accept the idea that civilization with all its trade offs is something to be ashamed of.

Ross McKittrick is Professor of Economics at the University of Guelph, a Senior Fellow at the Fraser Institute and an adjunct scholar of the Cato Institute.