



Green, With Envy

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An end to industrial civilization, but like in a totally pro-union way.

If this week's Green New Deal boomlet was politically significant, it wasn't just because a legislative newcomer elected by 110,318 voters in Queens and the Bronx proposed a government program to renovate or replace every building in the country within ten years, abolish internal-combustion-engine cars and commercial air travel, shut down all conventional utility generation without building nuclear, phase out flatulent cows, support persons "unwilling" to work, print new paper money to pay for it all, and on and on. New York City voters have elected radical mavericks to Congress before and will do so again.

No, the more interesting part of the story was the number of more senior politicians who chose to enable and promote this foolery. That would include Sen. Edward Markey, the veteran Massachusetts Democrat who stood alongside Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez at her announcement. And it would definitely include Sens. Cory Booker, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, and Kirsten Gillibrand, all presidential candidates who took to Twitter to endorse the initiative.

The boosters did *not*, let it be noted, include Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who is nobody's fool and has an important institution to run. "The green dream or whatever they call it, nobody knows what it is, but they're for it right?" Pelosi said in an interview just before the announcement.

The ensuing public discussion revealed points of view that I hardly remembered still existed, such as this, from a former Democratic Senate economist:

Q: Can we afford a #GreenNewDeal?

A: Yes. The federal government can afford to buy whatever is for sale in its own currency.

Which in turn drew this perfect response from Marc Goldwein:

Q. Can you microwave a metal fork?

A. Yes. The microwave is big enough to fit the fork, and will turn on with the fork in it if you hit the start button.

Large sectors of the left commentariat either withheld critical comment entirely, or relegated it to paragraphs far down in pieces that otherwise took the plan Very Seriously. An exception was Jon Chait, who called the Green New Deal strategy "at best grossly undercooked, and at worst fatally misconceived."

For the rest of us, incredulous reactions were more front and center, especially as to practicality. For example, one of the more popular planks — high-speed rail — is not exactly new, having been green-lighted by California voters more than ten years ago. In a state entirely controlled by Democrats, it has faced what one reporter calls “numerous lawsuits, huge delays, cost-overruns, [and] mismanagement,” and is “nowhere near being done.” A proposal for a maglev line to link Baltimore and Washington is finding tough going in liberal, environmentalist Maryland, in part because there’s seen as being nothing in it politically for poorer communities it would run through on its way between the two cities. And you guessed it: the Green New Deal scheme contemplates *much* more procedural complication of the sort that tends to slow or stop projects, including a leading role in decision processes for “front-line” marginalized communities, new veto rights for representatives of indigenous groups, and so forth.

One important dividing line here, it seems to me, is between those on both sides of the political aisle who acknowledge that policy involves unwelcome tradeoffs between different goods and those who are unwilling to make any such acknowledgment. The latter group tend to explain political opposition to their plans as arising from some combination of malice and ignorance, since who would knowingly oppose steps that have only benefits and no costs? Bernie Sanders has always favored rhetoric implicitly denying tradeoffs, and he has plenty of company on the Republican side.

Every politician who rushed to endorse the Green New Deal slogan — whether before the filling in of details about what it meant, or afterward — ought to be held to account by voters.

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