

The Star-Ledger

On climate change, politicians should stick to politics

By: Paul Mulshine-August 3, 2013

"Carbon dioxide from coal-burning power plants and factories in the Midwest ... contributes significantly to air pollution in our region." Huh?

Our former governor recently had her name on this op-ed piece in the New York Times calling for action on carbon-dioxide emissions.

The piece nicely illustrates two of my major objections to the "consensus" argument advanced by the alarmists.

The first is that the consensus among scientists extends only to agreement that CO-2 has a measurable, but minor, role as a greenhouse gas. To get to the apocalyptic scenarios endorsed by Al Gore, among others, you must make all sorts of unsubstantiated predictions about cloud activity. As I noted here, that question is very complex and the issue is far from settled.

My second objection is that the alarmists tend to rely on that alleged consensus rather than doing the research necessary to understand the issue.

Christie Whitman certainly hadn't when she took over the reins at the Environmental Protection Agency in 2001.

As I wrote at the time, Whitman made the mistake of confusing the climate-change issue with the ozone issue in an interview with the Times just before taking office. Here's an excerpt from a column I did back then:

When it comes to atmospheric pollution, Christie's a bit of an airhead, said Jerry Taylor of the Cato Institute. He directed me to look up Whitman's response to a New York Times reporter's question about global warming at the time of her nomination to the EPA.

"Clearly there's a hole in the ozone, that has been identified. But I saw a study the other day that showed that that was closing," she told the Times.

When informed by the reporter that she was talking about the wrong issue, Whitman refused to acknowledge her mistake. She insisted the greenhouse effect and the ozone layer are interrelated. Which they are, but only in the sense that both take place up there in the sky. As one environmentalist put it, "That's a little bit like the Treasury secretary being asked about currency fluctuations and answering about interest rates."

Whitman is far from the only alarmist to make that mistake. The same error was made by the leading Democratic legislator in the area of climate change, Assemblyman John McKeon of West Orange.

Even though McKeon sponsored a bill in 2007 that enrolled New Jersey in the failed Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, as recently as last year he still confused the climate-change issue with the ozone issue.

Consider the recent Times op-ed in that light:

EACH of us took turns over the past 43 years running the Environmental Protection Agency. We served Republican presidents, but we have a message that transcends political affiliation: the United States must move now on substantive steps to curb climate change, at home and internationally.

There is no longer any credible scientific debate about the basic facts: our world continues to warm, with the last decade the hottest in modern records, and the deep ocean warming faster than the earth's atmosphere. Sea level is rising. Arctic Sea ice is melting years faster than projected.

The costs of inaction are undeniable. The lines of scientific evidence grow only stronger and more numerous. And the window of time remaining to act is growing smaller: delay could mean that warming becomes "locked in."

A market-based approach, like a carbon tax, would be the best path to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, but that is unachievable in the current political gridlock in Washington. Dealing with this political reality, President Obama's June climate action plan lays out achievable actions that would deliver real progress. He will use his executive powers to require reductions in the amount of carbon dioxide emitted by the nation's power plants and spur increased investment in clean energy technology, which is inarguably the path we must follow to ensure a strong economy along with a livable climate.

Inarguably? Nonsense. It's one thing to say that it might be a good idea to reduce carbon emissions to avoid the risk of climate change. But there's no proof that will actually work.

Meanwhile we know for certain that banning such cheap energy sources as coal will make electricity rates higher and harm competitiveness with such countries as China and India that do not subscribe to climate-change hysteria.

And permitting the president to act unilaterally to effectively ban coal sets a terrible precedent. These four should have stopped with that sentence about a carbon tax. If Barack Obama would push for such a tax combined with a reduction in income-tax rates, then the Republicans might come along.

Alas, Obama and the Democrats are committed to class warfare. They don't want to do anything that would actually lower taxes on the top 2 percent.

If the climate-change crowd really cared about the issue, they'd push for a carbon tax that cuts income taxes on all Americans, including the rich.

Of course, if they really cared about carbon, they'd be pushing nuclear power, the sole source of massive amounts of carbon-free energy.

Below is another column I did on the subject back in 2001. That was before I had a blog, so this has not been online before. Note the many mistakes by politicians that went unchallenged. Also note the way in which a Washington Post columnist actually boasts about his ignorance.

It was headlined "It's not the air; it's the airheads"

I'm about to start an office pool on how long Christie lasts.

Not very is my guess. Christine Todd Whitman is the most dangerous type of politician, one who places more importance on feelings than on facts. You can get away with this type of thing when you're the boss, as Whitman was when she was New Jersey governor. You can have your underlings take the heat for your policy failures, a job Peter Verniero is performing admirably at this very minute.

But when you're the underling, you've got to know the facts. Forget the sound bites. The ideal Environmental Protection Agency administrator would be some total policy wonk who would speak in 500-word sentences filled with technical terms that few journalists understand.

Terms like "carbon dioxide."

This doesn't sound like a real complex term. But ever since I wrote about Christie's global warming gaffe last week, I have been amazed by the response. Whitman supporters have called me up to demand that we clean up the air and get all of that nasty carbon dioxide out of it. That this would end life on Earth doesn't seem to have occurred to them.

My fellow journalists aren't much better. I've spoken with several who believe that carbon dioxide depletes the ozone layer. Nope, that's chlorofluorocarbons. Even Whitman knows this by now - though she didn't back in January when she gave that infamous interview to the New York Times in which she confused the two issues.

The truly amazing thing is the way some journalists will brag about their ignorance while at the same time telling us how we should feel about some environmental issue. Star-Ledger readers saw an excellent example of this on this very page the other day when Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen made an impassioned plea for Al Gore to share his feelings with us on such issues as global warming:

"I confess that I am a little out of my depth when discussing such matters. Greenhouse effect? CO₂? Puh-leeze!" Cohen wrote.

After confessing he is out of his depth, Cohen goes on to prove it: "And in the meantime, a president elected by Antonin Scalia makes environmental policy that no one - not even Bush - saw coming. (Read my lips, no more CO₂)."

Read my lips - no more CO₂ - that's a real knee-slapper!

It would be even funnier if its author were aware that what he has proposed is a biological impossibility. Every time our lips move, we emit carbon dioxide.

This is a crucial fact in the debate over global warming: Carbon dioxide is a perfectly natural substance. It is not a pollutant. If it were, we'd be poisoning ourselves every time we exhaled. We humans emit carbon dioxide at the rate of about 15 liters per hour. That goes for journalists, too, though few seem to realize it.

If they did, Christie Whitman wouldn't be the only moderate Republican from New Jersey who's become a laughingstock. Reps. Marge Roukema and Mike Ferguson proved that with a letter to Bush last week in which they said of Whitman, "As a former Northeastern governor, she understands this issue on a scientific basis . . ."

Huh? Global warming is just that, global. Being from the Northeast confers no special knowledge of the problem. The duo went on to prove this:

"We are asking the President to put health and safety first. Global warming is an important reason to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but its consequences won't be seen for many years. Here in the Northeast we have a more immediate concern - carbon dioxide from coal-burning power plants and factories in the Midwest drifts eastward on the prevailing air currents and contributes significantly to air pollution in our region."

No it doesn't. Carbon dioxide emitted from a coal-fired plant in the Midwest has no more effect on air pollution in New Jersey than carbon dioxide exhaled by a porpoise in the Pacific. Global warming and air pollution are two separate issues, though none of the journalists reporting on the statement noticed that. The news stories made it appear as if Roukema and Ferguson knew what they were talking about.

If they had known, they could have contributed to the debate by noting the recent observations of the scientist credited with popularizing the global warming threat, James Hansen of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York. He recently published a paper suggesting carbon dioxide might not be the main culprit in global warming after all.

"Our paper presents evidence that global warming of the past century has been driven by non-CO₂ greenhouse gases," Hansen said. He went on to suggest a strategy for slowing global warming by focusing on reducing emissions of tropospheric ozone, methane and soot.

Unlike carbon dioxide, those emissions really are pollutants. Controlling them would improve air quality, and it could be done without destroying the American economy or requiring us to give up our cars. A smart EPA administrator would have dropped the unworkable Kyoto approach and instead endorsed Hansen's approach.

In fact, a smart EPA administrator will probably be doing exactly that in the very near future. It will be fascinating to see who it is.