



## The Totalitarianism of the Environmentalists

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Late last year, I gave a talk about human progress to an audience of college students in Ottawa, Canada. I went through the usual multitude of indicators – rising life expectancy, literacy, and per capita incomes; declining infant mortality, malnutrition, and cancer death rates – to show that the world was becoming a much better place for an ever-growing share of its population.

It seemed to me that the audience was genuinely delighted to hear some good news for a change. I had won them over to the cause of rational optimism. And then someone in the audience asked about climate change and I blew it.

While acknowledging that the available data suggests a “lukewarming” trend in global temperatures, I cautioned against excessive alarmism. Available resources, I said, should be spent on adaptation to climate change, not on preventing changes in global temperature – a task that I, along with many others, consider to be both ruinously expensive and, largely, futile.

The audience was at first shocked – I reckon they considered me a rational and data-savvy academic up to that point – and then became angry and, during a breakout session, hostile. I even noticed one of the students scratching out five, the highest mark a speaker could get on an evaluation form, and replacing it with one. I suppose I should be glad he did not mark me down to zero.

My Ottawa audience was in no way exceptional. Very often, when speaking to audiences in Europe and North America about the improving state of the world, people acknowledge the positive trends, but worry that, as Matt Ridley puts it, “this happy interlude [in human history will come] to a terrible end.”

Of course, apocalyptic writings are as old as humanity itself. The Bible, for example, contains the story of the Great Flood, in which God “destroyed all living things which were on the face of the ground: both man and cattle, creeping thing and bird of the air.” The Akkadian poem of *Gilgamesh* similarly contains a myth of angry gods flooding the Earth, while an apocalyptic deluge plays a prominent part in the Hindu Dharmasastra.

And then there is Al Gore. In his 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth*, Gore warns that “if Greenland broke up and melted, or if half of Greenland and half of West Antarctica broke up and melted, this is what would happen to the sea level in Florida,” before an animation shows much

of the state underwater. Gore also shows animations of San Francisco, Holland, Beijing, Shanghai, Calcutta, and Manhattan drowning. “But this is what would happen to Manhattan, they can measure this precisely,” Gore says as he shows much of the city underwater.

### **Thinking Environmentalist Laws Through**

It is possible, I suppose, that our eschatological obsessions are innate. The latest research suggests that our species, *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, is 300,000 years old. For most of our existence, life was, to quote Thomas Hobbes, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Our life expectancy was between 25 years and 30 years, and our incomes were stuck at a subsistence level for millennia. Conversely, our experience with relative abundance is, at most, two centuries old. That amounts to 0.07 percent of our time on Earth. Is there any wonder that we are prone to be pessimistic?

That said, I wonder how many global warming enthusiasts have thought through the full implications of their (in my view overblown) fears of a looming apocalypse. If it is true that global warming threatens the very survival of life on Earth, then all other considerations must, by necessity, be secondary to preventing global warming from happening.

That includes, first and foremost, the reproductive rights of women. Some global warming fearmongers have been good enough to acknowledge as much. Bill Nye, a progressive TV personality, wondered if we should “have policies that penalize people for having extra kids.”

Then there is travel and nutrition. Is it really so difficult to imagine a future in which each of us is issued with a carbon credit at the start of each year, limiting what kind of food we eat (locally grown potatoes will be fine, but Alaskan salmon will be *verboten*) and how far we can travel (visiting our in-laws in Ohio once a year will be permitted, but not Paris)? In fact, it is almost impossible to imagine a single aspect of human existence that would be free from government interference – all in the name of saving the environment.

These ideas might sound nutty, but they are slowly gaining ground. Just last week, a study came out estimating the environmental benefits of “having one fewer child (an average for developed countries of 58.6 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalent (tCO<sub>2</sub>e) emission reductions per year), living car-free (2.4 tCO<sub>2</sub>e saved per year), avoiding air travel (1.6 tCO<sub>2</sub>e saved per roundtrip transatlantic flight), and eating a plant-based diet (0.8 tCO<sub>2</sub>e saved per year).”

And then there is Travis N. Rieder, a research scholar at Johns Hopkins’ Berman Institute of Bioethics, who says that “maybe we should protect our kids by not having them.” He wants tax penalties to punish new parents in rich countries. The proposed tax penalty would become harsher with each additional child.

And that brings me to my final point. Since the fall of communism, global warming has been, without question, the most potent weapon in the hands of those who wish to control the behavior of their fellow human beings. Lukewarmists like me do not caution against visions of an environmental apocalypse out of some perverse hatred of nature. On the contrary, concern for the environment is laudable and, I happen to believe, nearly universal. But environmentalism, like

all –isms, can become totalitarian. It is for that reason that, when it comes to our environmental policies, we ought to tread very carefully.

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