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May 14, 2010

Cap and Scam

By **David Harsanyi**

Were you aware that Americans have a collective obligation to stop kicking challenges to the next generation and join the White House in supporting "sweeping" and "transformative" legislation? I thought so.

These days, there are few higher callings in Washington than pretending to save the environment. Authoritative "leadership" is sorely needed in this area -- and quickly, before the three-cornered-hat-wearing Visigoths storm Washington's barricades this midterm election.

Reporting for duty are John Kerry and Joe Lieberman, armed with a new cap-and-trade "energy" bill -- christened the Newspeak-esque "American Power Act" -- that is so inclusive it nearly secured the support of a single radical right-winger (as if there were any other kind) in Republican Lindsey Graham, before he had a temper tantrum.

Praising the legislation, President Barack Obama made his customary case, twinning the fictitious economic benefits of statism with freshman-class utopianism, claiming that "we will put Americans to work in new jobs that pay well and can't be outsourced -- jobs building solar panels and wind turbines; constructing fuel-efficient cars and buildings; and developing the new energy technologies that will lead to even more jobs, more savings and a cleaner, safer planet in the bargain."

Like most parents, I, too, hope my children one day toil in a nonproductive factory assembling taxpayer-subsidized wind turbines rather than turn to imported Canadian fossil fuels and constructive high-income professions. Unlike profits, you see, dreams never can be outsourced.

We are only in the "discussion draft" phase of the bill -- entailing tons of discussions on how to entice Western Democrats and circumvent Republicans -- which would make efficient energy more expensive, put non-energies on the dole and slap a layer of crony capitalism on the entire energy industry.

And seeing as we never waste a crisis, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has given cap-and-trade supporters another hammer to add to the debate. Though, as Newsweek summed it up, "considering that the Kerry-Lieberman bill contains a little something for everyone, it's likely to pass."

A little something for everyone except you, that is. The fabricated cap-and-trade "market" is a well-documented concoction of rent-seeking corporations that will work diligently with Washington to ensure taxpayers always foot the bill. As the legislation stands now, oil companies would also have to pay emissions allowances -- outside the cap-and-trade market -- which are nothing more than another gas tax.

This bill not only is loaded with obvious costs but also features underlying protectionist expenses that would benefit the usual industries (agriculture and steel) and, of course, unions. For example, the legislation would force nations "that have not taken action to limit emissions to pay a comparable amount" -- in other words, to pay for having the good sense not to engage in slow-motion economic suicide. (Hey, I thought we weren't supposed to impose our values on other nations.)

What do we expect from these countries and ourselves? The bill would mandate we reduce emissions by 83 percent by 2050. Roll up your sleeves, because we all will be doing organic farming. Or, as Pat Michaels of the Cato Institute points out, we "will allow the average American the carbon dioxide emissions of the average citizen back in 1867, a mere 39 years from today."



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Though an energy breakthrough could make all this possible -- and that would be wonderful -- solar panels, carbon sequestration and the fertile imaginations of political opportunists who make demands before they have solutions will not.

And remember, these legislators were supposed to be the grown-ups.

Reach columnist David Harsanyi at dharsanyi@denverpost.com.

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