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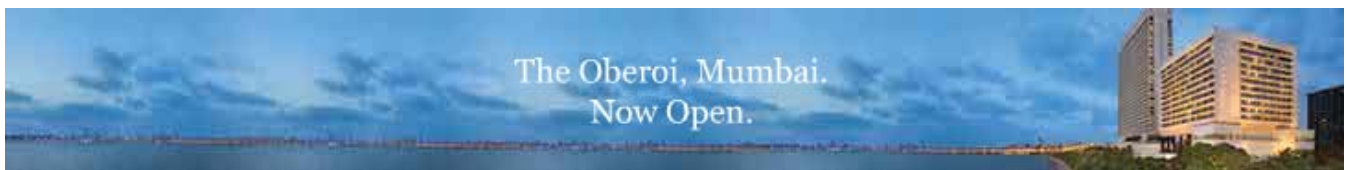
The New York Times

Monday, May 31, 2010

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Green

A Blog About Energy and the Environment



May 28, 2010, 1:00 pm

Not Dead, Only Resting? The Climate Bill

By [JOHN M. BRODER](#)



A popular parlor game in Washington is trying to figure out whether the Deepwater Horizon oil spill has helped or hurt chances for passage of comprehensive energy and climate change legislation. President Obama tried to bolster its prospects in his [news conference](#) on Thursday, saying the crisis highlights the need to find alternatives to the deadly and dirty fossil fuels oil and coal.



Reuters President Obama at his news conference on Thursday.

“More than anything else,” he said in his opening remarks, “this economic and environmental tragedy — and it is a tragedy — underscores the urgent need for this nation to develop clean, renewable sources of energy.”

Mr. Obama noted that the House had already passed a broad bill putting a price on greenhouse gas emissions and providing large incentives for conservation and new forms of energy. He said the Senate should act on [a measure](#) that was introduced earlier this month by Senators John F. Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Joseph I. Lieberman, independent of Connecticut.

“If nothing else, this disaster should serve as a wake-up call that it’s time to move forward on this legislation,” the president said. “It’s time to accelerate the competition with countries like China who’ve already realized the future lies in renewable energy. And it’s time to seize that future ourselves.”

Mr. Kerry and Mr. Lieberman have used the last several weeks, when all eyes were fixed on the catastrophe in the gulf, to quietly begin rounding up support for their measure from corporations that have been supportive of climate legislation and from environmental groups that are financing advertising and grass-roots efforts.

As part of that campaign, 60 corporations sent Mr. Obama and senators [a letter](#) urging them to act quickly on legislation.

The letter, signed by executives of big-name companies like Alcoa, Chrysler, DuPont, Exelon, General Electric, Shell and Weyerhaeuser, says: “The time to act is now. The U.S. needs a comprehensive energy and climate policy that will get us back on track by creating American jobs in the new, low-carbon economy.”

In an [op-ed article](#) published this week in Roll Call, Senator Kerry urged his colleagues to prove the doubters — and there are many — wrong by passing his legislation this year. He reminded fellow senators that things are not likely to get any easier.

“Ultimately, this is an issue to lead on — now, not at some future date to be decided — because this may be the last and certainly the best chance for the Senate to act,” Mr. Kerry wrote.

“The odds are that the next Senate — given a 2012 presidential campaign added to the dynamic and a slew of new senators replacing many who are retiring and who have contributed to the progress we’ve made — is going to be less likely than this one to find a path to the 60 votes needed for passage. Practically speaking, we’ve got to get it done this year.”

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1.
[Jim Bullis, Miastrada Company](#)
Sunnyvale California
May 28th, 2010
11:08 am

I wonder if anyone in Washington knows how much CO2 comes from burning a ton of coal.

The word "carbon" rolls nicely off the tongue, but it does not bode well for the public when nobody seems to know that carbon is a very different thing from CO2, and when one sets out to try to put quantitative thinking to work on this, the difference is enormous.

So the price for emitting "carbon" is going to be \$12 to \$28 per ton of carbon? Huh? A ton of carbon dioxide (CO2) has only 545 pounds of carbon in it. (I assume we are talking about the kind of tons that weight 2000 pounds.)

Let me guess: The proposed laws are talking about weight of CO2. Can anyone tell us how much carbon there is in coal? There is no single correct answer other than: "It depends on the coal." Anthracite, bituminous, lignite? Well don't leave out "sub-bituminous" which seems to be the description of the very abundant and cheap coal from the Powder River Basin. But forget the exact category. Powder River Basin coal is said to contain about half carbon and half a lot of other stuff. Let's assume it is true.

So a ton of coal gives a thousand pounds of carbon which produces 3700 pounds of carbon dioxide. (Atomic weight of carbon is 12 and oxygen is 16, so $44/12 = 3.66$.)

What does this mean? Well, at a \$20 per ton penalty (for example), that means that a ton of coal that costs \$12 to start with will end up costing an extra \$37 for a total of \$49 per ton to get it and use it. That works out to a cost of fuel for generating electricity in the existing power plants will go up by a factor of more than 4.

Of course the power companies have a lot of cash lying around so they will be happy to absorb this factor of four increase in fuel cost. (Yes, I am being sarcastic.)

To make this seem real, think about gasoline that we put in our cars going from \$3 to \$12 per gallon. Yes, I said \$12 per gallon. Does that get anyone's attention? Imagine how excited a fuel intensive industry will be to set up shop in the USA.

Maybe we might think about some other effects. Hm. I guess running up the fuel bill for industry by a factor of 4 might snap us out of our economic slump.

Slightly moderating the above, I should include the cost of shipping for coal, which varies widely, but an average might be reasonably estimated at about \$5 per ton for the Powder River Basin coal and its distribution over much of the Midwest and West. Now the cost of buying, transporting, and using that coal is $\$12 + \$5 + \$37$ given the assumed \$20 per ton of CO₂ penalty. The ratio of cost of fuel now is $\$54 / \$17 = 3.2$. So this would be like making gasoline go from \$3.00 to \$9.60. Still not so easy to sell.

Sorry to the well intentioned folk who think this is the way to solve the problem. And some might think I am against serious action to reduce CO₂. I am not. However, this is not an action that we can afford at this time. Maybe it will be appropriate later, but maybe there is a way to cut back by using less energy, not by imposing onerous penalties on industrial operations.

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2.

[Adrian O](#)

State College, PA

May 28th, 2010

12:47 pm

"countries like China who've already realized the future lies in renewable energy"

China realized that the future is in SELLING renewable energy equipment to us, not in USING it on a large scale itself.

China does not appear disposed to slow down its economy in any way by making its energy expensive.

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3.

[Adrian O](#)

State College, PA

May 28th, 2010

12:47 pm

China is also strongly supporting the Kyoto protocol.

<http://www.ccchina.gov.cn/WebSite/CCChina/UpFile/File188.pdf>

Under it, being classified as a developing country, China has no duties, while Western Europe is supposed to drastically cap its emissions.

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4.

James

Nevada

May 28th, 2010

6:01 pm

Re #1: "...think about gasoline that we put in our cars going from \$3 to \$12 per gallon."

So? The price of gas made about the same change, from \$1/gal to \$4/gal, between the time I bought my Honda Insight and the peak a year or so ago. But even at the peak, I was still paying less to drive a mile than my SUV-owning friends did when gas was cheap, 'cause I was getting better than 70 mpg, while they were getting maybe 15.

That's the whole point about raising carbon/CO2 prices. There are many possible ways to solve problems, in this case the problem of getting from A to B. Some of those use lots of energy, others don't. If energy is cheap, there's no financial incentive to use the more energy-efficient solutions.

So instead of some fuel-intensive industry setting up shop, in the US or elsewhere, that industry might think a bit about its production methods, and choose to use more energy-efficient processes. These aren't hard to find, whether in industry or in everyday life.

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5.

[Jerry Lee Mayeux](#)

Hattiesburg, Ms.

May 29th, 2010

7:21 am

Consider the Connection:

The more knowledge we have the more connections we make.

The Oil Spill, & Climate Bill are Connected!!!

www.facebook.com Jerry Lee Mayeux

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6.

G. Howard

Idaho

May 29th, 2010

7:27 am

It's all relative; the deeply indebted liberal arts graduate next door can barely afford to drive her old Honda Insight. The software engineer next door can drive his big new diesel truck as often and as far as he wants. These are the choices that can be made in a semi-free society for now. Raising prices does not change this dynamic, never has and never will.

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7.

David

Santa Fe NM

May 29th, 2010

7:27 am

Sooner or later we need to wake up and take on this issue. We cannot simply go on forever with our heads in the sand. There are many oil execs who want to wait till the last drops of oil are used till they deal with the need for cleaner and more abundant green technologies. Why; because they profit from oil and don't want to see the gravy train end. There are many reasons to change the way our country and the world use energy. It is not just global warming. These industries are the backbone of economic success so it is high time we get off our butts and take

on this challenge.

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8.

G. Howard

Idaho

May 29th, 2010

8:13 am

"There are many oil execs who want to wait till the last drops of oil are used till they deal with the need for cleaner and more abundant green technologies"

I beg to differ as a business man myself I would jump at any opportunity to make more money in green technologies. Like wise I know of no business that would set idly by and watch their business die a slow death. Clearly there is a lack of education of how building and maintaining a thriving profitable business works. There is no such thing as a business that wants to see raw materials dry up with out even trying to come up with alternatives. Indeed they are always at the forefront of looking for said alternatives.

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9.

David

Santa Fe NM

May 29th, 2010

10:20 am

"There is no such thing as a business that wants to see raw materials dry up with out even trying to come up with alternatives."

As the supply drops the price and profits go up. After peak oil (within the next few years) the price will continually rise unless alternatives are put in place.

"I beg to differ as a business man myself I would jump at any opportunity to make more money in green technologies."

It would be wonderful if the oil business people would be working in earnest for alternative energy system but I'm not holding my breath.

If we look at this solely as a for profit business model we will not make progress. The fact is coal will always be the cheapest energy source (for the foreseeable future). It is also the dirtiest.

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10.

melty

West Orange, NJ

May 29th, 2010

10:20 am

I'm with David (#7). Sooner: easier and cheaper; later: more painful and costly. It's going to be highly ironic if we end up having to [purchase nuclear reactors from French firms](#).

On the Bill itself, Jim Hansen's position is not being made clear by the media (including "Green", AFAIK). Why? Hansen says that unless action is taken to forbid the construction of any coal-fired plants unless they have an actual, functioning CCS system (if not to close many), our governments are lying to us (this seems to be a popular meme in some circles). How about it Green? Cap'n'trade+derivatives or fee-and-divided (CLEAR Act)? Has any journalist at the NYT covered the CnT vs FAD side of the story? If so, it must have been pretty low-key. If not, isn't it about time?

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11.

[Adrian O](#)

State College, PA

May 30th, 2010

2:42 am

RIP

Time to deal with real problems.

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12.

[jcschae](#)

California

May 30th, 2010

2:43 am

I'm with melty on this; we need to have better media coverage of what's actually in the bill rather than all the other stuff that reporters can write with only a little work.

Moreover, I'm distressed at the belief that cap and trade is a good idea. It's a good idea for the traders, like Enron's successors, but not for either energy suppliers or for the environment because prices will fluctuate and make investments seem riskier.

Consequences are important, so why don't we see more in the press about what passage of this bill will really mean. More profits for traders?

I believe a steadily rising carbon tax, however we define carbon, will provide both greater certainty for investing in a sustainable future and badly needed revenue for the government. But legislators haven't had the guts to oppose the fossil fuels interests. Will the latest spill stiffen their spines?

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13.

[Sam](#)

Cape Town

May 30th, 2010

2:44 am

That is America's problem, money. The climate laws aren't supposed to be about money, you could place a total ban on oil or coal, the sun would still rise the next day. The human race would quickly find an alternative believe me. We don't need oil companies for example, to survive. But we do need our environment and we can't buy another one of those. Wake up and smell the capitalist CO2.

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14.

[Steven Earl Salmony](#)

Chapel Hill, NC

May 30th, 2010

6:29 am

The lack of response to repeated efforts to communicate a perspective concerning something vital about the complex world we inhabit appears similar to the silence with which scientific evidence of human population dynamics has been met during the last "lost" decade of denial.

The growth of the human species worldwide could be the proverbial mother of all human-induced global

challenges. If that is so, then failing to courageously acknowledge and humanely address this predominant challenge will render efforts of humanity to overcome other human-driven, increasingly complex challenges to human wellbeing and environmental health ultimately irrelevant, I suppose.

Please consider that both those who believe human population numbers are exploding and those who believe human numbers are collapsing are correct. Globally, human numbers are undoubtedly increasing, but in some places on the surface of Earth human numbers can easily be seen decreasing. It depends upon your scope of observation. I am perceiving and thinking globally when I report human numbers are skyrocketing. In a similar manner, I can certainly recognize that human numbers in many places (eg, Japan or Italy) have been declining. But in order to make that report it is necessary for me to change my scope of observation.

Imagine that a change in one's scope of observation is like the difference between looking at the forest or the trees. Looking at the forest is like looking at absolute global human population numbers; whereas, looking at the trees is like looking at the population numbers in a place like Japan. Global human numbers can be increasing, while the human population numbers in Japan are decreasing.

Or imagine that we are looking at a wave, watching it move toward the shore where it crashes at our feet. As the wave we are observing moves toward us, there are many molecules in the wave that are moving in the opposite direction.....against the tide. Population numbers in Japan, Italy and many other places are moving against rapidly rising tide of absolute global human population numbers. Population numbers are simultaneously rising globally and falling locally.

So much of life and nature is indeed complex. Even so, we must not allow the acknowledged complexity of some things like climate policymaking to mystify, mesmerize or blind us to something comparatively simple and as evident as human population dynamics. If implications of the skyrocketing growth of absolute global human population numbers were not so profoundly and potentially threatening to the future of life as we know it and the integrity of Earth, there would be no reason for scientists with appropriate expertise to assume their responsibilities and perform their duties by rigorously scrutinizing the peer-reviewed and published research of human population dynamics and the human overpopulation of Earth. A fidelity to science and humanity, I suppose, demands that the scientific evidence be examined carefully and reported objectively.

Perhaps we can speak openly with regard to the complexity in climate policy of humankind and to the relative simplicity of the population dynamics of the human species.

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