

Letter: Climate Change Debate Needs Two Sides

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Dear Editors:

Your coverage of the climate change issue has been disturbingly one-sided. All participants, including the letters published to date, have accepted the premise that man-made emissions have led to increased temperatures and that further increases are both inevitable and will lead to dire consequences unless drastic changes are made. The only topics then left for discussion are the optimal magnitude and timing of emissions reductions, and the mechanism for achieving this end.

The lack of intellectual diversity cannot be justified by any certainty over the science involved. Through the 1970s, the primary concern among climatologists was global

cooling, not warming, and even today scientists continue to differ about the cause, magnitude, and consequences of increased concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Advocates of drastic action are willing to point to both reduced amounts of polar ice and *increased* amounts of polar ice as support for their faith in global warming, suggesting that their thinking is closer to religion than science.

Of course, these uncertainties do not imply that maintaining the status quo is the optimal solution, only that any estimates of costs or benefits are likely to depend greatly on unverifiable assumptions, and thus reasonable people can disagree about the proper balancing between foregone consumption and reduced emissions. For example, Professor

Stiglitz notes that, under some scenarios, the Maldives will be under water shortly. Would taking drastic measures to cut carbon emissions substantially reduce this likelihood? If so, would relocating the population (about 370,000) to higher ground be substantially cheaper than reducing greenhouse gasses sufficiently to halt the effects of planetary warming? Are there offsetting benefits to people in cooler climates that should properly be considered? Will using cropland to feed ethanol plants raise the cost of food and contribute to mass starvation? If there must be winners and losers in the climate change sweepstakes, should we consider the disparate effects of reducing global GNP growth on wealthy countries and emerging economies—where it is no great stretch of the imagination to think that people climbing out of poverty might prefer a warmer, but richer, planet?

One implicit assumption common to these papers is that the U.S. has a responsibility to reduce its energy consumption and corresponding carbon emissions because of externalities imposed on the rest of the world (such as the sinking feeling those residents of the Maldives are alleged to be experiencing).

That's a value judgment that goes beyond the realm of economics. I suspect that most people in industrialized countries would strongly object to the claim that they have a responsibility to give up their way of life to have a dubious effect on the climate elsewhere in the world 25, or 50, or 100 years from now. Furthermore, these efforts would have a much greater effect on the welfare of the poor, who can ill-afford the massive tax increases on energy consumption being contemplated here.

Previous efforts to reduce emissions don't provide rousing support for imposing more costs and increasing government meddling in markets. Despite Professor Stiglitz's claim that the Kyoto agreement has been an "impressive" success, most signatory countries failed to meet their emissions targets, and some even increased their emissions since signing the agreement. This suggests the cost of meaningful emissions reductions is quite high—perhaps higher than governments should reasonably impose. Possibly the real "inconvenient truth" is that politicians actually understand that the voters as well as the elites do not want to sacrifice their

own lifestyles to the uncertain god of global warming.

I welcome economists getting involved with the debate over climate change, as the profession can bring needed tools to the discussion. Economists should be well-suited to discussing the issue of climate change in a more dispassionate framework. Economists routinely work with decision-making under uncertainty and cost-benefit analysis. However, a debate requires more than one side to be represented, and the monochromic set of papers in the special issue seem more like cheerleading pieces than serious efforts to advance the debate.

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REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Stiglitz, Joseph (2006) "A New Agenda for Global Warming," *The Economists' Voice*, 3(7): Art. 3. Available at: <http://www.bepress.com/ev/vol3/iss7/art3>.

NOTE

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