

FREEDOM PRIZE ESSAY 2009

There can be no doubt that environmentalism as a political movement is going through something of a renaissance in this early part of the 21st century. Never before has the environmental movement had so much influence in politics and decision making around the world.

Environmentalism in its purest form is concerned almost entirely with the end (i.e. positive environmental outcomes) regardless of the means (i.e. socialism vs. free market). However, given its growing political importance on the back of the issue of climate change, environmentalism is increasingly becoming influenced by a new breed of environmentalist. Colloquially known as a “watermelon”, this new breed of environmentalist is less worried about the protection of the environment and is instead, far more concerned about advancing the cause of socialism.

This is undeniably the greatest threat currently facing free societies the world over. Socialism in all its forms has historically been an unmitigated disaster. Many eastern European countries are still recovering from its effects. However, the desire to return to this failed system is being eagerly being demonstrated by environmentalists on a daily basis.

Since gaining mainstream acceptance of the theory of anthropogenic climate change (ACC), environmentalists have sought to stifle and even censure debate on the subject. Those who didn't agree with the theory of ACC were initially decried as skeptics; however, they are now known simply as deniers. The term “deniers” conjures up an image of someone denying the most concrete of facts, as if they were denying the existence of gravity.

When the ABC screened the controversial documentary *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, the response by some commentators was flabbergasting. Dr Peter Christoff from the University of Melbourne wrote in *The Age*, “...because climate change denial supports, by default, future catastrophic social and environmental outcomes ... the comparison with Holocaust denial seems appropriate”¹ and finished by saying, “In supporting and engaging in climate change denial, it (the ABC) should now publicly explain and justify its decision”. Unfortunately, it's obvious that the whole point is lost on Dr Christoff. In seeking to silence critics of ACC, he is himself no better than the Nazi's to whom he has seemingly compared climate change deniers.

Sydney writer, Margo Kingston, went even further by saying², “David Irving is under arrest in Austria for Holocaust denial. Perhaps there is a case for making climate change denial an offence - it is a crime against humanity after all”. I suppose we should start employing the thought police sooner than expected. Ironically, on her blog³, Margo has a section titled “defending democracy”. Margo's defence of democracy, it seems, does not extend to one of the fundamental tenets of democracy – freedom of speech.

Rather than fearing a difference of opinion, environmentalists should welcome rigorous debate, because only through debate can the fallacies of arguments be exposed. Restricting freedom of speech doesn't rid society of undesirable opinions; it simply drives them underground, where they

¹ [Climate Change Is Another Grim Tale To Be Treated With Respect](#), Peter Christoff, *The Age*, 09 July 2007

² [Himalayan lakes disaster](#), Margo Kingston, *Daily Briefing*, 21 November 2005

³ [Webdiary](#), Margo Kingston

are no longer scrutinized. This is a far worse outcome. Even the seemingly omnipresent telescreens in George Orwell's *1984* weren't enough to stop Winston hating Big Brother.

Many environmentalists justify silencing dissent on the basis that – according to them – the debate is “over”⁴. The problem is that debates about science are never really “over”. When a debate is over, we are no longer talking about science but rather faith. Don't question, just believe. If environmentalists seek to silence debate, they are taking on a quasi religious tone. Even our most rock solid scientific theories are open to challenge if new discoveries are made. Newton's Law of Gravity didn't become a *law* of gravity, just because people *believed*; it was through thorough experimentation. If arguably the most well known piece of scientific research in human history was initially questioned, why aren't the theories behind AGW?

Admittedly it becomes a lot harder to challenge the status quo when government research funding is no longer distributed according to the quality of research, but instead according to political objectives and ideology. Take the draft paper released by the Department of Climate Change titled *Australian Climate Change Science – A National Framework* as an example. The paper states that the framework “will build on the past achievements of Australia's climate change science community and enhance future efforts by... ensuring that the science delivers what decision makers need”⁵. Forget ensuring the science delivers accurate results; the government needs results that back up its political position. In other words, if you're planning on researching an alternative theory on global warming – forget about the government funding it.

Perhaps the most glaring examples of the increasing socialist influence in the environmentalist movement are displayed in the proposed responses to ACC. In true socialist tradition, most (if not all) proposed solutions amount to nothing more than a transfer of wealth. In Britain, there is the proposed “Carbon Card”⁶. Under the proposed plan, each Briton will receive a yearly allowance of Carbon which will be tracked using a card which must be swiped every time a person refuels their car or buys an airline ticket *et cetera*. If a person uses all of their allowance, they must purchase more credits off someone who hasn't. As everyone receives the same allowance, heavy carbon users (i.e. the rich) will be forced to purchase credits off light carbon users (i.e. the poor).

So, all this begs the question – Have we already committed to a move towards less individualism and more state power and control? One would obviously hope not. Turning our back on a system that has provided so many with so much, in the name of a system that has taken so much from so many in the past just seems unfathomable.

If society is to have any chance of avoiding this move towards collectivism, the debate must be reframed entirely. How to respond to climate change is not simply a question about saving the environment. It poses a bigger question – are centralisation and state planning more effective at solving environmental problems than the free market?

⁴ [The Debate's Over: Globe is Warming](#), Dan Vergano, *USA Today*, 13 June 2005

⁵ [Australian Climate Change Science – A National Framework](#), Australian Dept. of Climate Change, 2008

⁶ [Every adult in Britain should be forced to carry 'carbon ration cards', say MPs](#), David Derbyshire, *Daily Mail*, 27 May 2008

Environmentalists argue the free market is the cause of the ACC problem. Whilst our current (semi) free market *may* be the cause, it by no means makes socialism the solution. The Soviets proved they could destroy the environment as well as anyone. If anything, a market that is truly free is the one thing that can solve any problem that nature – or man - poses.

Countries that are both prosperous and free have always excelled in adapting to change. It is not the wealthy inhabitants of the low lying countries in Europe who have the most to fear from rising sea levels, but rather poor Bangladeshis' and pacific islanders. Rather than attempting an inefficient and ineffective transfer of wealth from rich to poor, we must promote a system that empowers the poor to achieve greater wealth.

It must be noted that being anti-environmentalist does not necessarily make a person anti-environment. It is absolutely possible to disagree with the environmentalist movement and still be *pro* environment. Everyone is pro environment to some degree. Nobody actually seeks to destroy the world they live in for no reason. In fact, the true environmentalist should have no problem with the proposition of free market environmentalism as long as it achieves the desired outcomes.

To most people, environmental salvation is a case of Cost's vs. Benefits, which is why wealthier – read freer - societies will always be able to achieve positive environmental outcomes more readily than poorer, more repressed societies. When saving the environment is up against eating on a daily basis, saving the environment is always going to come a distant second. By allowing the poverty stricken the chance to empower themselves and achieve basic human needs, they become more able to afford extravagant things such as saving the environment.

But wealth means nothing without the concept of ownership. Many, if not most examples of environmental degradation in the free market – and under socialism for that matter - can be traced back to the issue of property rights. When nobody owns a resource, nobody genuinely cares about what happens to it. This concept isn't new; *The Tragedy of the Commons* was first published by Garrett Hardin back in 1968.

Public ownership of resources may seem like a good way of protecting them from exploitation by greedy capitalists, but the exact opposite is true. The best way to protect a resource from environmental vandalism is to allow the greedy capitalist to own the resource. This might explain why we often read of over fishing of the (publicly owned) oceans, but almost never hear about the over grazing of (privately owned) farmland.

But without the protection of the legal system, even the most widely assigned property rights mean very little. Currently, our courts will almost never uphold the rights of property owners, because it is deemed that benefits to the greater good are more important than the rights of the individual property owner. Would oceanic pollution exist on the same level as today if the oceans were privately owned? Absolutely not. Dumping untreated sewage in our oceans and rivers currently goes (relatively) unpunished because nobody owns the oceans and rivers, and even if they did, no court would currently uphold their claim that their property rights were being infringed.

If property rights were properly assigned and upheld by government and the courts, there would be a clear response by the free market if the science irrefutably backed CO2 emissions as the cause of ACC. CO2 intensive industry would – because of the threat of litigation – be forced to consider

technology that reduces CO2 emissions. Those who were adversely affected by CO2 induced climate change - for example a farmer whose land becomes arid and untenable or ski field operators whose mountain no longer receives sufficient snow – could argue in court that their property rights have been infringed by major CO2 polluters, and therefore seek damages. This would create a market induced increase in the price of CO2, without the need for the much vaunted state intervention.

But this strengthening of property rights will come to nothing if the science behind a court challenge is tainted by political ideology. Current government funding arrangements do not encourage creative and independent thinking; they foster a culture of mediocrity and conformity, and create a pseudo welfare system for a whole legion of scientists who depend on government funding to survive. If the problem goes away, so does the funding. This is hardly a great way to promote scientific independence.

In the same way that we have a separation of church and state, there must be a separation of science and state. Allocating funding on the basis of politics limits our potential for new scientific discovery. As the “Father of the Nuclear Bomb”, J. Robert Oppenheimer, once said, “There must be no barriers for freedom of inquiry. There is no place for dogma in science. The scientist is free, and must be free to ask any question, to doubt any assertion, to seek for any evidence, to correct any errors”⁷.

The market can only respond if the science on which decisions are based is sound. The worst outcome for society would be to allow our freedom of enquiry to be traded away on the basis of junk science. If the freedom to challenge the status quo is diminished, the original scientific basis for restricting liberty can never be challenged, and government can never be held to account for their original actions.

It is said that a leopard never changes its spots; and socialism is no different. Society mustn't gloss over the glaring historical failures of socialism as being merely inconvenient, or as being issues that can simply be avoided next time. They can't be. A prosperous future lies with free markets and free minds, not state planning and group think.

⁷ The Encouragement of Science, J. Robert Oppenheimer, *The Open Mind*