Op-Ed

Health, Climate Change, and the Descent of Science-Based Policy

DAVID ROSNER

“IF HUMANITY WISHES TO PRESERVE A PLANET SIMILAR TO THAT on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted,” James Hansen, the climate change scientist, argued in a provocative paper that appeared in *Open Atmospheric Science Journal*, “CO₂ will need to be reduced from its current 385 ppm [parts per million]” If the buildup of CO₂ “is not brief, there is a possibility of seeding irreversible catastrophic effects.”¹ Needless to say, the situation has not improved since 2008 when that paper was published. A majority of scientists agree that the “tipping point” (ie, the point in time when global warming cannot be stopped by any human endeavor) is approaching. The critical, albeit unanswered, question is, how quickly will this happen?

Regardless of the precise timing, however, it is safe to state the situation is a dire one.

This past summer, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and 16 other Democratic senators exposed the efforts of “think tanks” (many funded by David and Charles Koch), major oil companies, including Exxon-Mobil, and many other energy interest groups to scuttle congressional actions to control greenhouse gases. They spoke of how the Heartland Institute, the Cato Institute, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, along with many other seemingly benign-sounding organizations, were providing intellectual cover to politicians fighting environmental regulations and the Paris Agreement.

These US senators concluded that the threat of global warming could no longer be ignored. And because the evidence of a dangerous “tipping point” was so overwhelming, the senators argued, no responsible public official could gut the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or scuttle the Paris Agreement. To deny this evidence would place the planet’s health and well-being in serious jeopardy. The spread of geographically limited infectious diseases, massive migrations of people from coastal regions, and the destruction of agriculture in already

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stressed regions of the world were only a few of the serious health consequences that these “tipping point” theories identified.

Before the 2016 presidential election, it looked as if President Obama was uniting leaders from nations around the world to finally address the possibility of such a looming ecological disaster. Although climate change was barely mentioned by either presidential nominee, many hoped candidate Donald Trump’s claim that “human-caused climate change [was] a hoax” foisted upon us by the Chinese was still another example of his penchant for “extreme hyperbole.”² Many Americans hoped, further, that if elected he would appoint knowledgeable people dedicated to the goals of their agencies, not those driven by ideology, and that a safe distance would continue to exist between the special interests and government agencies charged with protecting our health and well-being.

Sadly, many of Mr. Trump’s cabinet appointees seem more guided by ideological beliefs than evidence. For example, for secretary of health and human services, he has appointed Congressman Tom Price, (R-Ga), formerly an orthopedic surgeon, who has vehemently opposed a woman’s right to make her own reproductive decisions and promises to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Dr. Ben Carson, once a gifted neurosurgeon, has never held elective or administrative office but is now to lead the massive Department of Housing and Urban Development. Betsy DeVos, an avowed enemy of public school education, wants to run the very same federal Department of Education she desires to dismantle. Similarly, former Texas governor Rick Perry, who has vowed repeatedly to eliminate the Energy Department, is now tapped to lead it. And for secretary of state, Mr. Trump chose Rex Tillerson, the chief executive officer of Exxon-Mobil, who has searched for and negotiated over fossil fuel sources all around the world but has never been formally trained as a diplomat. We can only wonder as to the fate of health insurance in the United States, especially for the 22 million people newly added to the insurance rolls; our national housing policies; the education of our children; and our role in global politics.

And speaking of the world we inhabit, Mr. Trump chose Scott Pruitt, the Oklahoma attorney general and a climate change skeptic, to run the EPA. A staunch supporter of the oil and gas industry, Pruitt has consistently opposed efforts to regulate carbon emissions and water pollution. Pruitt called the EPA a “disgrace” that was stifling the American economy and he appears ready to enforce the president-elect’s commitment to “get rid of [the EPA] in almost every form.”³ Mr. Trump gave Pruitt his

marching orders when he nominated him this past December: "For too long, the Environmental Protection Agency has spent taxpayer dollars on an out-of-control anti-energy agenda that has destroyed millions of jobs, while also undermining . . . businesses and industries at every turn. As my EPA Administrator, Scott Pruitt, . . . will reverse this trend."⁴

Not incidentally, Pruitt's selection was almost predictable. As president-elect, Mr. Trump depended heavily upon the advice and counsel of Myron Ebell, the director of environmental and energy policy for the Competitive Enterprise Institute. Ebell, who ran the Trump transition team's search committee for the new EPA chief, is known for spearheading efforts to derail the Clean Power Plan and declaiming, incorrectly, that EPA policies harm the economy.⁵

As *The New York Times* reported, Ebell leads the sardonically named "Cooler Heads Coalition," a loose-knit group "focused on dispelling the myths of global warming by exposing flawed economic, scientific, and risk analysis." Ebell has received funding from an assemblage of energy companies, including the coal industry, and is against establishing regulations to reduce CO₂ emissions. He called Al Gore and others who have raised the alarm about climate change "the forces of darkness" who "want to turn off the lights all over the world." He has even argued that the pope was "scientifically ill informed, economically illiterate, intellectually incoherent and morally obtuse," and that the pope's position was "theologically suspect [with] large parts . . . leftist driven."³

It is too early to tell what havoc these presidential appointees may wreak on our environment, geopolitics, health care system, women's reproductive health, the daily lives of our children, and, more broadly, the health and well-being of our entire citizenry. Nor can we predict the damage his appointees might do to the fragile greenhouse gas situation. Perhaps, some might argue, responsible civil servants who have dedicated their lives to protecting the environment in the EPA, the DOE, and other federal agencies will serve as a meaningful counterweight to ignorance and ideology.

One can only hope that when it comes to global warming, the public's health and other important federal policies, cooler heads *will* prevail.

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Address correspondence to: David Rosner, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, 722 West 168th Street, Room 934, New York, NY 10032 (email: DR289@columbia.edu).