Opinion

Climate Denial and a (Hopeful) Lesson From History

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IN RECENT MONTHS AND YEARS, SEN. SHELDON WHITEHOUSE, (D-RI) along with 19 other senators, has given more than 200 speeches on the Senate floor exposing a wide-ranging initiative to undermine legislative and popular efforts to act on climate change.¹ Among the issues the senators have raised is how much private money is behind think tanks, bloggers, and legislators who resist what is a virtual scientific consensus that global temperatures and sea levels are rising and that human activity is responsible. This is hardly the first time that special interests have sought to roll back environmental reforms. But Senator Whitehouse's mobilization of colleagues, along with the activities of numerous grassroots groups, offers some hope that the commercial interests that profit from weak regulation of environmental toxins and related threats will once again fail in their efforts to gut policies that protect the public, just as they failed during the Reagan administration.

Senator Whitehouse argues that special interests have created a powerful propaganda machine.² Prominent among these interest groups are the oil industry and other parts of the energy sector as well as a series of conservative foundations begun in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Cato Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, the George Marshall Institute, the Heartland Institute, and the Heritage Foundation, abetted by powerful billionaires such as the Koch brothers. This joint effort has deceived the public into believing either that climate change is not occurring or, if it is, that it is a natural phenomenon, not a product of human activity or the burning of fossil fuels. Their advocacy, Whitehouse points out, has enabled legislators to avoid difficult debates and delay action on issues that threaten every aspect of human existence.

These institutions have also provided cover for legislators like Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL) to claim that sea-level change is not due to melting

ice caps but to “natural” events like rocks falling into the ocean from the White Cliffs of Dover and/or the California shoreline. “Every time you have . . . soil or rock or whatever . . . deposited into the seas, that forces the sea level to rise, because now you have less space in those oceans, because the bottom is moving up,” Brooks announced with a straight face at a recent House hearing.³

While climate change is a current existential threat to humanity, the playbook that Whitehouse identifies has developed over the course of the past century. Specifically, CEOs and owners in a number of emerging industries promoted the interests of their companies, even when it appeared that those interests were not in the public interest—for instance, with often heavy-handed tactics aimed at suppressing information or buying off scientists.⁴

The strategies commercial interests now use are ever more sophisticated. It is not just intimidation, scientific ambiguity, and paying consulting firms that have demonstrated strong ability to spin that are the tools of the oil, chemical, and energy industries. Rather, traditional interest-group tactics are augmented by this series of institutions generally (but not always) outside of universities—institutions that provide the intellectual cover for people Whitehouse has identified in his descriptions of the “web of denial.”

These new strategies evolved in response to industry’s surprised realization in the 1970s that federal legislation to protect the environment and members of the public threatened by toxins in it had been amazingly effective. In the space of just a few years following the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the environmental protection acts of the early 1970s, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other agencies in the federal government and the states had generated, and Congress had passed, a substantial number of regulations. The regulations had many goals, for example, to control air pollution (revisions of the 1963 Clean Air Act), water and groundwater pollution (Federal Water Pollution Control Act amendments of 1972), and waste disposal and hazardous waste releases (Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 and Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980). Further, federal regulators had banned the use of lead pigment in household paints, polyvinyl chloride in plastic bottles, and asbestos in certain products, decisions that in themselves were not critical but that, in the eyes of executives, set dangerous precedents.

Fortunately for polluting industries, the election of Ronald Reagan changed the political situation in environmental regulation. Major corporations, working through their trade associations, produced a new set of challenges to regulators. For example: "The CMA [Chemical Manufacturers Association] Technical Department, like the rest of Washington, has undergone a radical change since last November [1980]," that organization's secretary noted in reviewing the previous year's activities. "Not only do we have a new home, but a new government as well." Explaining the importance of the change, the CMA executive wrote, "With the Carter Administration, a good advocacy program consisted of sending a massive legal text to the agency, and then following with a court challenge. This is now out of date." New tactics could not just challenge government, for Reagan could be counted on to reshape the EPA. Indeed, the new administrators at the EPA and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) approached the chemical industry "to develop voluntary standards for some aspects of regulation that the Federal Government can adopt."⁴ This was an extraordinary opportunity.

In the coming years, the Reagan administration would appoint EPA and OSHA administrators who prioritized reducing the size and scope of both agencies and eliminating some of their core functions. Thorne Auchter at OSHA and Anne Gorsuch at the EPA led agencies they appeared to despise.

However, there was swift political reaction to these brazen attempts to undercut the newly established agencies. Both Auchter and Gorsuch were soon replaced with less ideological leaders. While the agencies never again mounted such strong policies to protect the environment and workers' health, the basic structures of the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Superfund legislation, and the bans on PCBs and lead paint remain in place.

Amidst every new outrage overtaking the Trump-era EPA under Scott Pruitt, the experience of the early 1980s offers some grounds for hope. Senators from both urban and rural states have joined Senator Whitehouse to oppose increasing threats to the environment and public health through the elimination of regulations.² Perhaps these senators, supported by the American people, will achieve what their predecessors did in 1984: expose the dangerous, even fraudulent, actions that put the entire planet in danger and remove to private life the politicians who abet these acts.

References

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