

The green lobby's misdirected anger

Oct 31,2018 – THE JORDAN TIMES - Last updated at Oct 31,2018

BOSTON — In August, when US President Donald Trump proposed to freeze fuel-efficiency standards for cars and trucks, environmentalists and their supporters were outraged. Now, the temperature of the debate has risen again, following a special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that highlights the urgent need to take drastic action to curb carbon dioxide emissions.

While the environmentalists' efforts to combat climate change is laudable, their reactions to these developments are misdirected. The strategies for reducing emissions that they advocate barely move the needle and are, in many cases, counterproductive; giving companies and governments a "fig leaf". We need a real-world strategy for tackling climate change that marshals the world's technological resources without imposing crippling restrictions on economic growth.

Much of the backlash that followed the Trump administration's proposed relaxation of vehicle emissions standards has centered on two aspects of the 500-page report on which it is based. First, the administration accepted that the change will increase greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions, but claimed that the increase would be inconsequential. Second, the administration estimates that global temperatures will increase by 3.5°C by 2100 if no action is taken. These assumptions provoked fierce criticism; the Boston Globe published the headline: "The Trump Administration Content to Sit Back and Watch Planet Warm."

Ten days later, the IPCC report reignited the debate. It argued that limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the goal set by the 2015 Paris accord, will require draconian measures such as halting the use of internal combustion engines and deploying renewables to generate 75 per cent of the world's electricity needs.

These measures will eliminate CO₂ emissions, according to the IPCC, but may not be enough. A 1.5°C increase in global temperatures is now accepted as inevitable, and warming is likely to reach 2°C before the end of the century.

There are a number of reasons for these pessimistic projections. While many consumers in developed countries proclaim support for sustainability, they are generally not willing to pay for it or inconvenience themselves. Citizens of developing countries want a higher standard of living, regardless of the impact on global temperatures. Companies are responding to these mixed signals with weak, token

actions to curb emissions that do not affect their bottom lines. Governments and politicians shun any policies that threaten jobs or job creation.

The result is that consumers are encouraged to partake in “feel good” activities. For example, separating trash and using cloth bags while shopping are largely meaningless behavioural changes. For example, household trash accounts for a mere 3 per cent of the solid waste produced in the United States.

Companies follow the lead set by consumers. An example is the (ineffective) ban on plastic straws introduced by McDonald’s, which continues to serve beef, which is a major contributor to global warming, owing to the methane produced by cattle. Methane is 28 times more potent as a GHG than CO₂.

Finally, governments are part of the problem, not the solution. The US government withdrew from the Paris climate agreement, and the Australian government has weakened its commitment to it. The German government was complicit in the emissions scandal that engulfed the country’s auto industry, and Germany’s GHG emissions have not come down during the last decade. In fact, it is likely that Germany will not meet its 2020 or 2030 targets, despite pushing other countries to adopt them.

A clear-eyed assessment of the current state of affairs will reveal that the immediate battle is already lost, which brings us to the Trump administration’s controversial emissions policy. The report that sets out the policy shows that the emperor is indeed naked. Small, incremental sustainability initiatives are inadequate and hence pointless, needlessly frustrate economic growth and job creation and enable developed countries to insist on economic concessions from developing countries that they have no right to demand. When viewed through this lens, the administration’s fuel efficiency report does not look as crazy as it has been made out to be.

There are only two ways, I believe, for the world to avoid what most scientists refer to as disastrous global warming.

First, we could stop economic growth, because the idea of “green growth” is a fallacy promulgated by environmentalists who seem to be engaged in wishful thinking. Such an extreme action would require the world to reinvent the way economic activity is measured. And it would involve ethically dubious policies such as forced population control.

Second, the rich world could launch a “Manhattan Project” to develop and scale technologies that can rid the planet of GHG accumulation. These may include carbon

sequestration and geoengineering, as well as innovations such as plant-based meat, alternatives to concrete for structures and nuclear-fusion power generation.

The second approach offers a real-world solution to the global warming crisis that avoids the moral pitfalls of the first, which include leaving billions of people trapped in poverty. We can combat global warming only if we deploy our greatest natural resource: human ingenuity.

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