

Escaping Climate Catastrophe: Two Paths

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Climate Change was briefly discussed in the June Democratic Presidential debates by the 20 hopefuls. Two themes worthy of our attention can be glimpsed to help understand the policy debates to come.

First, is the idea, much beloved by economists, and roundly despised by consumers and business people, is to raise prices on carbon. Hike prices and eventually slash carbon emissions is the idea. Price hikes are achieved through a carbon tax, or carbon tax and dividend, or a cap and trade program, imposed either at the pump, mine head, or refinery.

While economists like William Nordhaus prove we can tax our way out of climate disaster, politics and experience says something else. Raising prices on gasoline drove the Yellow Vest movement in France into the streets and Republican Senators in Oregon to flee to stop carbon cap and trade.

And while Nordhaus' analysis is correct if the carbon tax was indeed high enough, experience has shown that, first, such a tax must be phased in slowly to avoid plunging the world into recession as followed sudden spikes in oil prices.

Second, the increase in gas prices from \$.30 a gallon to more than \$3.00 a gallon has not ended the petroleum era. Consumers, if pressed, will drive the same number of miles, or more, in new efficient cars, the so-called Jevron's paradox.

Third, electric cars, which run on about \$1.00 per gallon equivalent, are already cheaper than fossil fuels. Coal, natural gas and nuclear plants are being shut down because they cannot compete.

There is absolutely no need to raise prices to encourage a rapid renewable transition. Renewable resource prices are also rapidly decreasing on a month by month basis. Even with the Trump tariff on imported solar panels, the price of solar energy is still cheaper than before the tariff.

I build solar farms. What cost \$3.00 a watt a few years ago is in the \$1.50 a watt range for large scale PV. I am building small ground mount systems today with 108 solar panels meeting electricity needs of 4 to 5 homes for a capital cost of \$2.10 a watt right now.

Ecological Economic Growth Path: What's Really Needed

We don't need price hikes. We need clear mandates to transition within twenty years to a 100% renewable energy system. Renewable energy will be cheaper, healthier, job creating, and help us stop climate catastrophe.

Renewable energy like solar, wind, hydro, has zero fuel costs and zero emissions. Zero fuel costs and rapidly dropping capital costs are why fossil fuels and nukes cannot compete. Almost no one wants to build new fossil fuel or nuke plants unless promised endless government subsidy and bailouts.

Simply passing legislation on state and federal levels mandating a transition to renewable resources has and will get the transition immediately in motion. It does not impose a tax or put people out of business by raising prices.

An ecological economic growth plan is designed to lower prices, reduce pollution, create stable mass employment in good community jobs and be rooted in the pursuit of both economic growth and social justice.

The role of government is to first, mandate a path toward 100% renewable energy in electric, gaseous, and liquid fuels. This means renewable electricity to heat, cool, and light our homes, power our factories, and power vehicles and mass transit. It can mean use of hydrogen or bio-diesel as alternative vehicle fuel. All vehicles do not need to be electric, but most will be.

Second, just as government invested in building the interstate highway system in the 1950s and 1960s, investment in renewable energy infrastructure is what we need. For example, use low interest revenue bonds for commercially viable systems like rapidly building the EV charging infrastructure and energy storage systems.

Government must support needed upgrades of the electric power grid to move power from where generated to where it is used. Rapid development of energy storage along with decentralized renewables and local micro-grids means upgrades are not simply building massive power lines, but the sophisticated controls, interconnections, combined battery-super capacitors- flywheels storage systems at transformed fossil fuel plants to maintain grid stability.

Third, retraining of fossil fuel workers for renewable energy future and creation of tax advantaged Green New Deal transition zones are a crucial part of a renewable energy transformation. This can be further leveraged by the growth of community based cooperatives to both own the renewable energy systems of the future, and partner with renewable developers through renewable energy hedge agreements to purchase renewable energy at long term fixed prices keeping both low consumer prices low and making long-term finance easy for renewable developers.

A quick start for the renewable transformation is not just theory. A bill for a 100% national renewable portfolio standard, 50% renewables by 2035 and 100% by 2050, for example, was recently introduced in Congress by Sen Tom Udall, co-sponsored by Senators Martin Heinrich, Angus King, Tina Smith, and Sheldon Whitehouse.

That's why the 2020 election matters. The first 100 days of our next President can mean quickly starting the renewable transformation by mandating this transition. It doesn't raise taxes. It doesn't require an army of bureaucrats to enforce. It signals consumers and businesses that the times they are a changin'. Fossil fuel and nuclear industries can transform to join the renewable future, or not.

We have lots of work to do. A few simple laws by Congress can unleash decades of

renewable energy prosperity. Economic growth can mean ecological improvement, not ecological damage and destruction. Ecological economic growth can mean both a growing economy and an improvement in social justice and strengthening sustainable communities.

It is an enormous error to conflate broadly shared wealth shared as a result of a properly structured renewable energy transformation and a Green New Deal with ecological pillage of industrial business and pollution as usual. It's time to understand and embrace the difference. Our lives and our futures depend on this.

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Roy Morrison Builds solar farms. His next book forthcoming is EEG (Ecological Economic Growth).

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