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Taxing Denial: Putting American climate denial to use

Julian Cribb

In an interview with Fox Newsⁱ, Donald Trump's newly appointed Chief of Staff, the Republican National Committee Chair Reince Priebus, confirmed that the official stance of the Trump White House will be that climate science is a "bunch of bunk".

An analysis published in the Washington Postⁱⁱ found that America's failure to pull its weight on climate mitigation could boost world temperatures to a nearly 2 degrees C rise by 2050, depending on whether the rest of the world holds the line agreed to at Paris COP21, or whether other countries (like Australia, for example) take it as a pretext to backslide on their commitment to present and future generations.¹

Stripped of political persiflage, the Trump position – as articulated by Priebus and the growing gang of climate deniers appointed to hold office under Trump – is that tens of millions of humans must die to protect the shareholder value of a handful of crumbling US resources corporates who refuse to enter the 21st Century and prefer to stick with the 19th and 20th.

According to a World Health Organisation 2016 report "An estimated 12.6 million people died as a result of living or working in an unhealthy environment in 2012 – nearly 1 in 4 of total global deaths". Those unhealthy environments mostly consist of air, water, food and

¹ Edited December 6th at 10AM to clarify that if the US fails to follow-through with climate mitigation targets and continues along the "business as usual" path, world temperature rise is projected to reach +2.3 to +2.5 degrees by 2100, compared to the Paris Limit path that aims for a +1.9 degree increase.

furnishings polluted by toxins sourced from the petrochemical and coal industries. In China and India, on average, 4000 people die daily from air pollution alone. Around a third of the world's rising cancer rates are now attributed to chemical exposures, as are the rising waves of autism, reproductive dysfunction and mental disease.

And this doesn't begin to include the numbers who will perish in the famines, wars and weather disasters that will accompany accelerating climate change.

So, including their impact on the global climate, fossil fuels are now claiming lives at a substantially higher rate than did World War II (about 7m/year). It follows that a decision by the new American leadership to promote fossil fuel use, instead of replacing it with cleaner, safer and more sustainable forms of energy amounts to a declaration of war on humanity as a whole – and one that will, unavoidably, come at the cost of tens of millions of lives.

The same argument applies to the hollow, insincere, foot-dragging policies of Australian political leaders on climate and renewables: many are perfectly willing to sacrifice human lives for the sake of a few cosy coal company sinecures post political retirement. Like asbestos, they are hoping the long industrial chains between the primary sources of pollution and its victims will, for a time, obscure the trail of ultimate responsibility. But, eventually, there will be a Nuremberg.

In the meantime, the world has the interesting issue of how to deal with an America many of us thought of as a friend, ally and benefactor – and which now displays all the potential for becoming a rogue state worse by far than North Korea, in terms of the damage it can inflict on humanity.

The simplest and most elegant solution is the one powerfully articulated by Donald Trump himself, during the election campaign when he declared that Mexico should pay for building his border wall, to keep the *tide of emigrants* out of the US.

If America wants to damage the world's climate, destabilise the planet and cause havoc to the health of its citizens by promoting toxic energy solutions, then it is only fair that America should pay to clean up the mess it creates and compensate the victims.

The logical answer is for signatories to COP 21 to agree to impose a multilateral carbon tax on the trade (goods and services) of any country which abandons its agreement.

A tax that would pay for all the climate mitigation, reforestation, water and food security measures, new energy research and especially, for the building of vast new renewable energy plants around the world.

That way, America's coal, oil, gas and shale sector can be made to fund the rise of its competitors – and bankroll the transition to a clean, sustainable world. Since they have devoted recent decades to amassing fortunes at the expense of farmers, native peoples, blue collar workers and the middle classes of the world, it would be Shakespearean justice to spend those fortunes on improving global wellbeing in this way. If the carbon levy was big enough, it could even be used to end world poverty...

The aim of a carbon levy on US trade is not to hurt the tens of millions of sensible, caring Americans who don't swallow the Trump nonsense, nor the tens of thousands of ethical American businesses who are already committed to climate action. It is to add steel to their arm and might to their lobby in their effort to compel their country's leaders to abandon this self-defeating course.

Yes, a carbon levy would be a form of sanction. Just like the sanctions America itself supported against apartheid South Africa, Iran, Libya, Cuba and many others. Do such measures work? Well, they certainly appear to – or people wouldn't keep imposing them. They certainly strengthen opposition movements within the sanctioned country. And in America, land of the dollar, money speaks louder than ideals.

The carbon levy should not only be on American sourced goods and services, but also on products of multinational companies founded or substantially based in the US. That includes Apple, Microsoft, Coca-Cola, Continental Grain etc. Oh, and don't forget the US arms industry either – they seem to have the ear of the Trumpists. It could be imposed multilaterally, but in the meantime bilaterally will do. If enough countries impose a carbon levy it will be a sign to Washington that we're serious.

At the same time the carbon levy could be suspended for the 'goodies' of the US economy – Mr. Musk's electric cars and batteries, for example or solar firms Verengo, SolarCity and SunPower. This would send a clear market signal about what products the world prefers, which ever-agile US commerce would be quick to exploit.

So let's all play the Mexican Wall game back to Mr. Trump and his cronies. For the sake of all our grandkids.

Thanks, Donald, for another great business idea!

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MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/taxing-denial/>

ⁱ <https://thinkprogress.org/trump-climate-change-bunk-28c5c44cee#.m1cuhi6e>

ⁱⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/11/29/this-is-what-it-would-take-for-trump-to-truly-damage-the-planets-climate/?tid=ss_tw-bottom&utm_term=.0931ff77bd80