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Hot air from Obama

Bjorn Lomborg | December 15, 2008

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IN one of his first public policy statements as America's president-elect, Barack Obama focused on climate change, and clearly stated both his priorities and the facts on which these priorities rest. Unfortunately, both are weak, or even wrong.

Obama's policy outline was presented via video to California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's Governors' Global Warming Summit, and has again been shown in Poznan, Poland, to leaders assembled to flesh out a global warming road map. According to Obama, "few challenges facing America and the world are more urgent than combating climate change".

Such a statement is now commonplace for most political leaders across the world, even though it neglects to address the question of how much we can do to help America and the world through climate policies v other policies.

Consider, for example, hurricanes in America. Clearly, a policy of reducing CO2 emissions would have had zero consequence on Katrina's devastating effect on New Orleans, where such a disaster was long expected. Over the next half-century, even large reductions in CO2 emissions would have only a negligible effect.

Instead, direct policies to address New Orleans' vulnerabilities could have avoided the huge and unnecessary cost in human misery and economic loss. These should have included stricter building codes, smarter evacuation policies and better preservation of wetlands (which could have reduced the ferociousness of the hurricane). Most importantly, a greater focus on upkeep and restoration of the levees could have spared the city entirely. Perhaps these types of preventative actions should be Obama's priority.

Likewise, consider world hunger. Pleas for action on climate change reflect fears that global warming may undermine agricultural production, especially in the developing world. But global agricultural/economic models indicate that even under the most pessimistic assumptions, global warming would reduce agricultural production by just 1.4 per cent by the end of the century. Because agricultural output will more than double during this period, climate change would at worst cause global food production to double not in 2080 but in 2081.

Moreover, implementing the Kyoto Protocol at a cost of \$180 billion annually would keep two million people from going hungry only by the end of the century. Yet by spending just \$10 billion annually, the UN estimates that we could help 229 million hungry people today. Every time spending on climate policies saves one person from hunger in 100 years, the same amount could have saved 5000 people now. Arguably, this should be among Obama's top priorities.

Obama went on to say why he wants to prioritise global warming policies: "The science is beyond dispute and the facts are clear. Sea levels are rising. Coastlines are shrinking. We've seen record drought, spreading famine, and storms that are growing stronger with each passing hurricane season."

Yes, global warming is happening, and mankind is partly responsible, but these statements are - however eloquent - seriously wrong or misleading.

Sea levels are rising, but they have been rising at least since the early 1800s. In the era of satellite measurements, the rise has not accelerated (actually we've seen a sea-level fall during the past two years). The UN expects about a 30cm sea-level rise during this century, about what we saw during the past 150 years.

In that period, many coastlines increased, most obviously The Netherlands, because rich countries can easily protect and even expand their territory. But even for oft-cited Bangladesh, scientists just this year showed that the country grows by 20sq km each year, because river sedimentation wins out over rising sea levels.

Obama's claim about record droughts similarly fails even on a cursory level: the US has in all academic estimates been getting wetter through the past the century (with the 1930s dust bowl setting the drought high point). This is even true globally during the past half-century, as one of the most recent scientific studies of actual soil moisture shows: "There is an overall small wetting trend in global soil moisture."

Furthermore, famine has declined rapidly in the past half century. The main deviation has been the past two years of record-high food prices, caused not by climate change but by the policies designed to combat it: the dash for ethanol, which put food into cars and thus upward pressure on food prices. The World Bank estimates that this policy has driven at least 30 million more people into hunger. To cite policy-driven famine as an argument for more of the same policy seems unreasonable, to say the least.

Finally, it is simply wrong to say that storms are growing stronger every hurricane season. Even for the Atlantic hurricane basin, which we tend to hear about most, the total hurricane energy (ACE) as measured by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has declined by two-thirds since the record was set in 2005. For the world, this trend has been more decisive: maximum ACE was reached in 1994 and has plummeted for the past three years, while hurricanes across the world for the past year have been about as inactive as at any time since records began to be kept.

Global warming should be tackled, but smartly through research and development of low-carbon alternatives. If we are to get our policies right, it is crucial that we get our facts right.

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