A New Climate Policy for the County and the Country

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Dear Reader, I sent the following description of some of President-Elect Biden’s first actions when he takes office on January, 20, 2021 to our Board of Supervisors. These are all important and necessary, though not sufficient, policies to limit climate change. The problem, as I see it, is that the Democrats lost House seats and so far, at least have not won control of the Senate, so it will be difficult for Biden to be too aggressive. Maybe this is a good thing. 73,000,000 Americans voted for President Trump, and not only are these folks in denial of climate physics, they think wearing a mask to limit the spread of coronavirus is an infringement of their liberties. But they are not deplorables as Hilary Clinton would have it. Of the 78,600,000 Americans who voted for Biden, very few understand the effect of dramatically reshaping the Earth surface systems on the sustainability of civilization any better.

Abraham Lincoln was elected president on a platform of limiting the expansion of slavery and not on a platform of eliminating slavery. Northerners were driven not so much by a purely moral argument but by the realization that a farmer who did not own slaves could not compete fairly with one who did. Their argument was one in support of entrepreneurship and the microeconomy against large plantation owners. Abolitionists pressured Lincoln to free the slaves early in his presidency but he knew he couldn’t do it until the people would support it. He once remarked that it would be good to have God on his side but he needed Kentucky, a slave state. As soon as Sherman was on the march to the sea and Grant was winning the war in Virginia, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, one of the most important documents in American history. Unfortunately, it did not end racism.

I disagree with many psychologists who presume people are not persuaded by facts. I hypothesis that we are. Otherwise, we would not have had stone tools and fire, much less smart phones and MRI machines. All of our technology is based on facts. The problem is we are surrounded by so much bullshit, it is hard to know what the facts are. I’m reading Lisa Feldman Barrett’s book “How Emotions are Made” and she makes a convincing case that indeed humans are not rational, which seems to contradict my hypothesis but interestingly supports another which is that neo-liberal economics is nonsense. She writes: “…*several of economists’ most fundamental ideas caused a series of financial crises leading up to the Great Recession. A common theme running through these ideas is that unregulated free-market economies work well. In these economies, decisions regarding investments, production, and distribution are based on supply and demand with no government regulation or oversight. Mathematical models indicate that under certain conditions, unregulated free-market economies do work well. But one of those ‘certain conditions’ is that people are rational decision makers. I have lost count of the number of experiments published over the past fifty years showing that people are not rational actors.*” My argument has always been that another of these ‘certain conditions’ is that the laws of thermodynamics don’t apply. Unfortunately, they do. So how did so many well educated and brilliant economists come up with rubbish? Obviously, economists as a group are not rational. Politicians and pundits embrace free-market economics because as the historian Yuval Harari observes, such ideas make a virtue of ignorance.

And here is the rub, Trump supporters are right that we are drowning in bullshit and that we need to clean up the swamp. It is just that when one is drowning, it is hard to find solid ground. This is a consequence of another psychological discovery: the Dunning-Kruger Effect. We have to actually know something to know the difference between bullshit such as mainstream economics and truth such as thermodynamics. These 73,000,000 voters know very well they are being misled. They saw all those great paying jobs in Flint, Michigan and elsewhere vanish. They just don’t know who is misleading them and why. In a sense, they are way ahead of many liberals, who for example, think a carbon tax will solve climate change. But with Clinton and other liberals calling them deplorables, they have fallen for Trump’s bullshit rhetoric. What other choice did they have? Let me remind my liberal friends, the other choice they had was the progressive message of Bernie Sanders.

The light at the end of the tunnel may very well be the disgraceful downfall of Trump. He might be able to pardon himself, though that water remains untested or he may resign and have Pence do it. But such a pardon is an admission of guilt and a president can only pardon federal charges. Future criminal charges cannot be pardoned, otherwise that would give a pardoned person license to commit all kinds of future crimes with reckless abandon. There are many opportunities to criminally charge Trump which have not yet been taken. Also, state and local criminal charges and civil lawsuits cannot be pardoned by a president and many of these are pending. And Pence cannot do anything about the 500 million to one billion dollars in bad loans coming due against Trump. Maybe they will come to see the Trump the rest of us see: just another old fat white guy with a bad orange combover who cheats at golf, disparages our troops, disrespects women and doesn’t give a damn about anybody but himself.

And if Biden heeds the good advice of Senator Sanders and other progressives in his party, and stops the bullshit and drains the swamp of mainstream economists, lobbyists, billionaires and corporate greed, these 73,000,000 may come around. Then we make progress.

One really good idea is Medicare-for-All. It is estimated to save Americans $450 billion per year and over 70,000 lives. The answer to mainstream economists and pundits who irresponsibly claim we cannot afford it, is that we cannot afford not to do it. If Trump had worked with progressive Democrats and enacted such a program, he would have won reelection in a landslide.

Actually, I have no idea. I have no hope that facts will prevail, but facts are all I have. Next week, I’ll be back with more climate science.

Dear Supervisors, Staff and Friends

Now that the dust seems to have settled and former vice president Joe Biden is now the president elect and Senator Kamala Harris will become the next vice president, it is not at all premature to discuss how this will impact climate and energy policy in Loudoun County and beyond.

Trump has reversed 100 fact-based environmental rules by executive order [Popovich] which now need to be restored. He has been replacing scientists with political appointees within NOAA, NASA and the EPA in an attempt to undermine the next National Climate Assessment [Flavelle]. This important document needs to be science-based and not subject to political influence. The Trump administration has also rewritten endangered species policy further endangering our cohabitants [Li] and these policies too need to be replaced.

President-elect Biden plans to have the US rejoin the Paris climate accord on his first day in office. He has also pledged to sign ten executive orders to combat the climate crisis---his words---on his first day in office. Some of these actions as they relate to federal buildings and lands may be applicable to county buildings and public lands. They are to:

• Require limits on methane pollution for oil and gas operations.

• Use the federal government procurement system to work towards 100% clean energy and zero-emissions vehicles.

• Ensure US government buildings and facilities are more efficient and climate-ready.

• Implement the already-existing Clean Air Act, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation by developing new fuel economy standards to ensure all new sales for light- and medium-duty vehicles will be electrified, and annual improvements for heavy duty vehicles.

• Double down on liquid fuels like advanced biofuels and make agriculture a key part of the solution to the climate crisis.

• Reduce emissions and cut consumer costs through new standards for appliance and building efficiency.

• Require federal permit decisions to consider effects of greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, and ensure every federal infrastructure investment reduces climate pollution.

• Require public companies to disclose climate risks and greenhouse gas emissions in their operations and supply chains.

• Protect biodiversity, slow extinction rates and conserve 30% of America's lands and waters by 2030.

• Permanently protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, establish national parks and monuments, ban new oil and gas permits on public lands and waters, modify royalties to account for climate costs and creating programs to enhance reforestation and develop renewable energy on federal lands and waters to double offshore wind by 2030.

According to the Washington Post:

*In a sign of how Biden has already elevated the issue, he discussed the topic with every European head of state with whom he spoke on Tuesday, including the leaders of Britain, France, Germany and Ireland. Biden has started frequently referring to the climate “crisis,” suggesting a heightened level of urgency.*

*A team of former Obama administration officials and experts have created a 300-page blueprint laying out a holistic approach to the climate while avoiding some of the pitfalls that hampered President Barack Obama, who shared some of the same goals but was unable to enact all of them. Dubbed the Climate 21 Project, it took a year and a half to develop and was delivered recently to Biden’s transition team. The document outlines how the incoming administration could restructure aspects of the government to move faster on global warming.*

The Climate 21 Project document is available here: <https://climate21.org/>. In terms of shaping county policy, this document would be a good place to start.

It is sad that the party of Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater which supported environmental conservation would degenerate into a political party that would work to destroy the environment. Hopefully, with a return to science-based policy, that is behind us.

Additionally, President-Elect Biden has also already selected his Covid task force [Subbaraman]. According to the article in the science journal Nature: “*The immediate naming of the board is a stark contrast to President Donald Trump’s efforts to contain the pandemic. He has been criticized for ignoring the advice of public-health specialists and downplaying the dangers of the coronavirus, worsening the pandemic’s toll on the country*.”

For more on the Trump administration mishandling of the coronavirus see [Viglione].

Unfortunately, we are setting COVID infection records daily and the Trump administration will be responsible for another ten weeks, before sound scientific guidance can take over. There is good news in that Biden is already leading as it were from the outside by encouraging wearing masks and social distancing. And there is some good news regards a vaccine.

Best regards

[Flavelle] Christopher Flavelle and Lisa Friedman, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/27/climate/trump-election-climate-noaa.html>

[Li] Ya-Wei Li, Joe Roman, David S. Wilcove, Timothy Male, Holly Doremus, Species protection will take more than rule reversal, Science 06 Nov 2020: Vol. 370, Issue 6517, pp. 665-666, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abb3806>

[Popovich] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/climate/trump-environment-rollbacks-list.html>

[Subbaraman] Nidhi Subbaraman, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-03207-2>

[Viglione] Giuliana Viglione, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-03035-4>