
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

More limits than we wish to know

Commentary | By Craig Gurian | Environment

November 23, 2010 — Across a range of issues, Americans seem to have a very long fuse. Make it impossible to support a family on one income? No problem. Keep real wages effectively flat for more than three decades? We'll live with that. Reduce or eliminate pensions, using, among other tools, bankruptcy laws wildly tilted against unions? That just must be one of the exceptions to the sanctity-of-contract rule.

But try to impose a gas tax only a fraction of that long in place in most Western European countries? We go nuts. In the realm of environmental sustainability, short-term interest seems to outweigh all other considerations.

And the most fundamental issue that we need to confront in order to limit environmental disaster won't be discussed by any faction of any major political party, or by advocacy groups of any size: population growth — everywhere, but not least in the United States — is choking us.

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It won't work on any level. Ever hear of supply and demand? The more people chasing homes within a limited space, the less likely they'll be to yield anything that is affordable.

And then there is the small matter of climate change. In a [sobering article in The Atlantic](#) recently, James Fallows summarized the current state of play: the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide is at least 390 parts per million (or "ppm"), "probably the highest level in many millions of years." The level keeps on rising because of the 37 billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions per year, emissions that disproportionately come from the United States.

While Europe produces about 11 tons of carbon emissions per person, the U.S. produces about 25 tons per person, or about 7.5 billion tons per year.

Now Fallows' article is bound to be controversial with environmentalists because he concludes that since "coal already plays such a major role in world power supplies, basic math means that it will inescapably do so for a very long time." I don't know enough to be able to assess whether Fallows is overstating the need for coal over the long term, but the Lawrence Livermore scientist he quotes surely has it right: "Good ideas about climate change are not in competition with one another...We need every possible solution, and then we need more."

One way to do this is to try to break the problem down into more manageable pieces, as suggested by Princeton's Carbon Mitigation Initiative. If you successfully make headway on a series of 4 billion ton "wedges" of emission reductions, as Fallows puts it "eventually it adds up."

Let's do a little more math. At 25 tons of carbon emissions per person, a U.S. with 300 million people looks very different from a U.S. with 500 million people. We're not talking about small numbers: we're talking about a difference (just in respect to carbon emissions) of 5 billion tons of emissions annually (two-thirds of current U.S. emissions).

The U.S., of course, is not the only country on a suicidal path. Were per person emissions in India to grow from their current low level to the European level, and were India's population to grow by 500 million people (the mid-range of current estimates), that would represent an additional 5.5 billion tons of emissions per year.

So why isn't population stabilization seen broadly as one of the "possible solutions"? How is it that population stabilization advocates of the late 1960s and early 1970s are still derided as prophets of gloom and doom whose claims about environmental degradation and social costs have been "disproven" — even as more and more of the costs of inaction are being toted up?

Action on this front falls victim to a remarkably broad array of opponents. Climate deniers tend to be population deniers, too. Religious opposition in the U.S. is strong. Some want desperately to believe that fossil fuel supplies really will last forever (a fantasy only possible when ignoring the small detail that fossil fuels come from a finite source of once-living things).

And attempts to discuss this issue generally are stalemated by the assumption that population stabilization is a stalking horse for anti-immigrant sentiment. Have population stabilization arguments sometimes been deployed in the service of an anti-immigrant or racist agenda? Of course. But is discussion of demographic consequences automatically a reflection of bigotry? Absolutely not.

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Just as China has long recognized that its population could not continue to rise unchecked, and as India has begun to take tentative steps to address the problem of a growing population, we have to end the code of silence and begin to think about this issue seriously.

Not many people would say, for example, that a U.S. population of 1 billion is actually sustainable, so the question — even for those who imagine themselves to be in favor of fully open borders — really isn't about whether some limitation is necessary, but rather about where and how to set that limit. How, for example, can we be be least coercive? How do we build a policy that maximizes racial equity?

Anyone who has thought about this can tell you one thing for certain: the longer we wait, the harder and more painful it will be to act effectively. And if we don't, and conditions continue to deteriorate, that very long fuse will get a lot shorter — and political explosions, as we've seen this year, can as easily be reactionary as progressive.

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