
To stop global warming, end eco-extremism

Pragmatic solutions provide the best options

Kenneth Green

EVERY now and then, the avuncular mask falls away from David Suzuki's face, and we catch a glimpse of his inner revolutionary—and it isn't a pretty sight. In fact, it's both anti-humanist and authoritarian. It's also essentially anti-environmental, since his is the kind of extreme environmentalism that has bred an anti-environmental movement which presumes that claims of environmental degradation are just a green cloak for the promotion of massive expansion of governmental control and collectivism. And there certainly are reasons for thinking this way.

An early example of Suzuki's extremism occurred in 1999, as the world pondered, with what turned out to be excessive fear, the potential for computer networks to fail with the beginning of the new millennium. In an interview with Reuters, Suzuki opined, "I hope there is a major glitch. It might give Mother Earth a rest." He also said, "I think it would be wonderful if things collapsed for a few days," cheerfully admitting that "chaos would happen... but it would be an amazing opportunity for people to really start thinking about things—and a global collapse would really make people think" (Eichler, 1999, Dec. 22). However, such a "major glitch" would have actually had astonishingly bad consequences for

both humanity and the environment. A failure of the control systems on dams, chemical facilities, and nuclear reactors, for example, would have led to catastrophic events around the world.

More recently, in a speech to students at McGill University, Suzuki said, "What I would challenge you to do is to put a lot of effort into trying to see whether there's a legal way of throwing our so-called leaders into jail because what they're doing [to the environment] is a

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criminal act" (Gunter, 2008). The Suzuki Foundation tried to pass off this latest authoritarian outburst as a rhetorical flourish rather than a real suggestion, but as analysts point out, the fact that he said virtually the same thing to another audience in January 2008 probably indicates that he meant it (Gunter, 2008).

And what does Suzuki want Canadian leaders to do, lest they be incarcerated? Suzuki's climate action plan calls for increasing governmental control over virtually all aspects of Canadian life. On his list are tighter carbon emission standards for industry; mandatory

improvements in vehicle fuel economy; national building efficiency standards; subsidies to renewable energy; provincial efficiency standards for homes, businesses, utilities, and industries (with audits); zoning that would force people into high-density living; zoning that would intentionally make automobile use less desirable, including traffic calming, fewer driving lanes, and additional bicycle lanes; and other changes (David Suzuki Foundation, 2008). Though Su-

zuki has recently come out in support of the British Columbia revenue-neutral carbon tax (David Suzuki Foundation, 2008), he is not willing to simply price carbon and let the market work; in addition to carbon pricing, he seems to want the expansion of government to the point where it controls everything that

people do with energy—and that is almost everything that people do.

Of course, Suzuki isn't alone in staking out the extremes of the environmental movement. Various European eco-leaders have come out with similar extremist statements. George Monbiot, a columnist for the *Guardian* newspaper in London, has suggested that "every time someone dies as a result of floods in Bangladesh, an airline executive should be dragged out of his office and drowned" (Monbiot, 2006, Dec. 5). Several Americans have also chimed in on the "jail them or drown them" theme.

Columnist Ellen Goodman, for example, has written, "Let's just say that global warming deniers are now on a par with Holocaust deniers" (Goodman, 2007, Feb. 9). As well, David Roberts, a blogger at the environmental website, Grist, also suggests what we should do with such people: "When we've finally gotten serious about global warming, when the impacts are really hitting us and we're in a full worldwide scramble to minimize the damage, we should have war crimes trials for these bastards—some sort of climate Nuremberg" (Roberts, 2006).

And of course, the "big kahuna" of climate policy-mongering, Al Gore, pulls out all the stops in his books, *Earth in*

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the Balance and *An Inconvenient Truth*, which together constitute an environmental manifesto of governmental expansion. In *Earth in the Balance*, Gore wrote that saving the environment is the "central organizing principle" for civilization:

[It] means embarking on an all-out effort to use every policy and program, every law and institution, every treaty and alliance, every tactic and strategy, every plan and course of action—to use, in short, every means to halt the destruction of the environment and to preserve and nurture our ecological system. Minor shifts in policy, marginal adjustments in ongoing programs, moderate improvements in laws and regulations, rhetoric offered in lieu of genuine change—these are all forms of appeasement, designed to satisfy the public's desire to believe that sacrifice, struggle, and

a wrenching transformation of society will not be necessary. (1993: 274)

The former US vice president actually turns up the heat, so to speak, in *An Inconvenient Truth*, in which he employs the holocaust-invoking "denier" rhetoric to tar anyone who disagrees with him. In addition to implicitly associating "deniers" with the Nazis, Gore compares anyone who is critical of extreme climate change scenarios to the dreaded "tobacco scientists" of yesteryear (Gore, 2006).

The problem with all this extremism isn't simply the degradation of public discourse; it is also the inevitable polarization that results whenever one group

stakes out an extreme position that would result in others losing out, whether that loss is monetary, loss of social prestige, a loss of consumer choice, a loss of political representation, or some oth-

er loss. It is almost a law of social motion: every action generates an equal and opposite reaction. Or, as economists would argue, people respond to incentives. Show them that you intend to stop them from doing what they wish to do, and they will oppose it every time. Instead of pragmatic solutions, eco-extremism only breeds resistance. This is why Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* documentary and other eco-disaster movies such as *Waterworld* were followed by rebuttal movies such as *The Great Global Warming Swindle* (Durkin, 2007) and *An Inconvenient Truth, or Convenient Fiction?* (Hayward, 2007). Eco-fiction tales of environmental destruction such as *The Day After Tomorrow* are countered by Michael Crichton's anti-eco thriller, *State of Fear* (2004).

In December 2006, Heidi Cullen of The Weather Channel stated that the American Meteorological Society should "revoke the Seal of Approval by

the American Meteorological Society for any TV weatherman who is seen to express skepticism that human behaviour is creating a climate catastrophe." In mid-November, the retired founder of The Weather Channel declared global warming to be "the greatest scam in history," adding, "I am amazed, appalled and highly offended by it. Global Warming; It is a SCAM. Some dastardly scientists with environmental and political motives manipulated long term scientific data to create an illusion of rapid global warming" (D'Aleo, 2007).

What is really needed now is a pragmatic middle-ground—one that seeks solutions to environmental problems that are compatible with democratic capitalism, a system that provides innumerable benefits to all North Americans. Unfortunately, with extremists like David Suzuki regularly politicizing what should really be more of an engineering exercise, it is unlikely that we will see such improvements any time soon.

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A lack of transparency in BC's hospitals

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IN late February, the Fraser Institute released *Hospital Report Card: British Columbia 2008*, which, for the first time, objectively measured the performance of BC's 95 acute care hospitals across 39 indicators of inpatient quality and patient safety. The availability of detailed performance metrics for hospitals in British Columbia might have been a boon for many. It might have helped patients decide which hospital to go to. It might have provided comfort to patients in need of urgent or emergent care, knowing that the public would be made fully aware of the performance of the facility that would be treating them. It also might have benefited facilities seeking to provide measurably better care.

The province's Health Regions ensured this did not happen. They did so by employing one very powerful tool that health data providers in Canada and the province's Ministry of Health have given them: the opportunity to keep hospital specific information anonymous. That is, even though *Hospital Report Card: British Columbia 2008* provided information on 39 indicators of hospital performance for 95 hospitals in BC, the report was unable to actually name any hospitals.

A key defense of this position, made by BC's Minister of Health, George Abbott, was that the methodology used to produce the first Hospital Report Card for British Columbia was of poor qual-

ity (for example, see Fayerman, 2008, Feb. 26). The reality is that the Hospital Report Card used state-of-the-art indicators developed by the United States Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality in conjunction with Stanford University. These indicators, which have been shown to reflect quality of care inside hospitals, are presently in use in more than a dozen US states, including several of the more populous ones: New York, Texas, Florida, and California (Esmail and Hazel, 2008). Furthermore, these indicators have been used in a report published by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy at the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Medicine, and their use has been supported in a report published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Bruce *et al.*, 2006; Millar *et al.*, 2004).

The BC Minister of Health's claim that the indicators did not account for differences in patient populations between hospitals (for example, see Fayerman, 2008, Feb. 26) was also unfounded. In fact, the indicators that made up the report card were risk-adjusted using a process developed by 3M™ which is recognized to be a gold-standard system for risk-adjusting hospital data (Esmail and Hazel, 2008).

Put simply, the methodology used to provide comparisons of hospital performance is of a high quality and does appropriately account for differences in patient populations across the 95 hospitals in British Columbia.