

Clean Air: A Right or a Luxury?

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EDITORIAL

Normally, when a discussion or debate becomes couched in "either-or" terms, there is little hope for further understanding or communication. The subject of the Clean Air Act is no different. Industry has for many years framed its argument against clean air in terms of choosing between pollution control or a prosperous economy; between the free enterprise system or government regulation; or between cheaper energy and costly environmental protection. "Either-or" debates play upon the natural emotion of fear. The effectiveness of an "either-or" polemic resides as much in the facts it omits as in the extremes it discusses.

For example, much of the ongoing debate regarding the Clean Air Act has centered upon the Administration's philosophy that every regulation should undergo a cost-benefit analysis. Columnist Ellen Goodman convincingly revealed last March that cost-benefit analyses are simply not appropriate for certain areas of regulation. Her case-in-point was a Food and Drug Administration decision to delay implementation of a law passed in 1980 regulating the preparation and testing of infant baby formulas. She quoted Representative Albert Gore, D-Tenn., who asked the Food and Drug Administration, "What dollars-and-cents values do you place on the avoidance of serious brain damage in infants?"

In the case of the Clean Air Act, the cost-benefit sham is a rhetorical device used by "either-or" debaters to ignore the basic distinction between the goal of clean air and the strategies for achieving that goal.

Just as it is inappropriate to apply cost-benefit analysis to brain damage in infants, it is inappropriate to apply cost-benefit formulas to the standards for clean air. A Yale University study, for example, found that in the ten year period between 1960 and 1970 (before the Clean Air Act), five additional people per 100,000 population died for every additional 1,000 cars as a result of automobile pollution.

On the other hand, it is appropriate to apply cost-benefit analysis to the strategies and methods for achieving those standards. It should not be surprising, however, that when one does apply such an analysis to the current proven methods of attaining clean air, the economic benefits outweigh the costs by a large margin.

For example, the most comprehensive cost-benefit survey available was released in 1980 by the President's Council on Environmental Quality. It concluded that benefits of the Clean Air Act exceed costs by \$17 billion to \$21.4 billion. The answer is consistently the same in other studies:

- The National Crop Loss Assessment Network (a government network set up by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Departments of Energy and Agriculture) estimates that ozone damage to just corn, wheat, soybeans, and peanuts is \$3.1 billion per year, or about 10% of the total value of the four crops harvested.
- Current studies by the University of Wyoming have found that people living in all parts of the United States now value pristine air in the great recreational areas of the Southwest at a level of \$5.8 billion annually.
- A 1982 report by Robert Wolcott, Director of the Public Interest Economics Foundation, and Adam Rose, professor of economics at the University of California, concludes: "The aggregate impacts of the Clean Air Act on the U.S. economy are extremely small and, on balance, positive." Between 1972 and 1979, a total of \$65.2 billion was spent on air pollution abatement. That sum represents only 0.6% of the nation's total gross national product.

The proven methodologies of PSD (Prevention of Significant Deterioration), programs for non-attainment areas, strict deadlines, ambient air standards, and control of mobile sources have not hurt the economy. They have stimulated it through protection of a quality environment as well as a dollar savings to the consumer. The Clean Air Act is not a burden. It is an investment, and one of the few that is paying off even in poor economic times.

For a moment, however, let us assume the Clean Air Act is an economic burden. A recent *New York Times* and CBS poll indicates that the American public supports continued strong environmental protection, "even if it requires economic sacrifice" (emphasis added). More than two of every three people questioned agreed that "we need

to maintain present environmental laws in order to preserve the environment for future generations." Nearly two-thirds of the 1,479 Americans of voting age who were surveyed said they would keep the Clean Air Act tough.

In 1981, a Lou Harris survey also indicated that a large majority of Americans support the current provisions of the Clean Air Act. Eighty-six percent of those surveyed opposed weakening the Act.

In light of such public support, it is legitimate to ask why the Administration is pushing hard to weaken the Act. The answer is due, in part, to political philosophy; and due, in part, to influence-peddling.

The bottom-line issue of the Clean Air Act debate is not effectiveness or protection of the American public. It is government regulation. Nowhere is this fact more clear than in the debate over automobile emission controls. The cost per car for pollution controls averages less than \$100 - an amount that represents less than one percent of the total sticker price on most 1982 model automobiles. To be sure, the issue on the minds of the automobile industry is government regulation of the industry - not the cost of air pollution control devices.

The second part of the answer was brought to light in April by Common Cause. This organization revealed that 93 corporations which had been found in violation of the Clean Air Act gave contributions totaling \$729,715 to members of Congress who are now reviewing the Act. Forty-two members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee received a total of \$390,435 from political action committees representing industry; and 16 members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee received a total of \$339,280.

In fairness to members of Congress, it should be noted that the contributions are perfectly legal and, to date, there is no evidence directly linking the gifts with the Clean Air Act. However, the mere fact that 93 corporations which violated the Clean Air Act are willing to target large sums of money to members of specific committees hearing the testimony on the Clean Air Act is more than coincidental. It is a powerful influence that will affect some Congressmen and will not affect others. Nevertheless, it is an indicator of the power that industry is willing to exert to ignore the wishes of the majority of the general public. It represents a return to the attitude of "What is good for General Motors is good for America."

Instead of relaxing standards, Congressional leaders should seize upon the opportunity provided by favorable public opinion to strengthen the Clean Air Act. They should redouble

efforts to treat air pollution as a national and international problem, rather than a local, state, or regional problem. They should, for example, act to control acid rain, as Sweden has done, rather than simply study the problem further. In short, they should attack the problem of air pollution rather than retreat from it.

It is government's role to protect the health and safety of this and future generations of Americans. It is not the government's role to guarantee industry a profit. Clean air is not a luxury. It is a right!