



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Global Warming, Central Planning, and the Free Market

by Bart Frazier

Global warming is a topic that can turn any gathering of friends into a shouting match quickly, and with good reason. If the direst predictions are true, our civilization is in for a rough ride down the road. But unfortunately, the debate over global warming has been framed in such a way that one of the best options to either stop global warming or alleviate its consequences has been left out — to let the market guide the decisions of those it affects.

There is a good chance that global warming is occurring. Many, but certainly not all, scientists now agree that the planet is heating up, but important questions remain unanswered. Assuming that the planet is warming, is human activity the cause and, if so, what can and should be done about it?

Climate change is par for the course in the history of planet Earth. Even schoolchildren know that long ago, vast glaciers of ice stretched over much of our planet, gouging out valleys and fjords, drastically altering the landscape. At one time the sea level was 300 feet lower than it is today, and it is even theorized that the entire planet was covered by ice during the Cryogenian period more than 630 million years ago.

Of course, the planet has a history of getting hot as well. The most dramatic example is known as the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum. About 55 million years ago, it is estimated that the average global temperature rose about 6 degrees centigrade over the course of 20,000 years. For the most part, ice did not even exist on the planet at that time.

There were other less dramatic temperature increases in the history of our planet, but the point is that climate change is a naturally occurring phenomenon with the Earth cooling some of the time and warming at others. It has changed in the past, and it is going to change in the future, with or without us.

Why would all of this matter to a libertarian? Because proposals are being made in governments around the world that will dramatically affect our well-being and our liberty. The greenhouse effect theorizes that man-made gases, particularly CO₂, will trap solar heat within our atmosphere and thus raise global temperatures. The seemingly logical way to stop global warming

then would be to mandate a reduction in CO2 output. Governments would tell factories how much CO2 they could emit, tell auto manufacturers how polluting cars could be, ban certain types of products from the marketplace, et cetera.

But there are several problems with this approach.

What if government officials are wrong? The greenhouse effect makes very good theoretical sense, and there is some evidence that global temperatures are rising. There is also some evidence that temperatures are *not* rising, but let's assume that they are. What if this temperature rise is due to natural causes? Global temperatures have fluctuated wildly in the past and there is no evidence that the process has ceased. Water vapor, volcanic activity, animals, and the sun itself contribute to the effects of global warming far more than humans do. And at this point in history, we simply cannot differentiate natural temperature changes from those that are man-made. The draconian and expensive solutions being proposed may be aimed at a naturally occurring phenomenon.

If global warming is man-made and human activity is the cause of rising temperatures, rising sea levels, et cetera, the cost to curtail greenhouse gas emissions cannot possibly justify the action. One of the most compelling arguments that proponents of emissions control have is that the poor who cannot afford to cope with climate change will suffer horribly. But what will happen to the poor of the world in places such as India and China that are currently modernizing their countries? For the first time, literally billions of people are making gargantuan leaps in living standards. Many still do not live well by Western standards, and burdening their economies with emission limits would throw their societies back into squalor. Are we to take away the tools they are using to get out of poverty and subsistence living just when they are breaking out of it? They have more or less embraced free-market ideas, and just at the time they are starting to reap the rewards they are to be cast back into poverty so that the world can save the poor. It makes no sense.

A loss of liberty

But the most important reason for saying no to emissions control is to maintain our liberty. Emissions control means people control. Right now, the discussion is revolving around industrial emissions. Power plants, factories, and the like will be forced to curb their gas emissions. Forcing business owners to run their plants by state edict is bad enough, but once it is acknowledged as a justifiable action against global warming, emissions control will lead to much harsher regulations.

It sounds alarmist, but we have seen it in the past. The second-hand-smoke crusade is a recent example. Some health experts began to think that second-hand smoke caused health problems in nonsmokers, and a movement to create nonsmoking areas in restaurants emerged. Civil libertarians voiced concerns that once nonsmoking areas were established, there would be a push to ban smoking outright. They were dismissed as Chicken Littles, but in the end, they were

proved right. Smoking has been banned outright in bars and restaurants in several states, and some counties have even attempted to ban smoking outdoors.

The audacity of the people who called for the controls is enough to make your blood boil, but it proves that you can't give them an inch, because they will take a mile. The same goes for global warming. In the name of saving the planet, they will destroy the vestiges of individual liberty.

It would be easy for much liberty to be lost if the greenhouse crusaders were to get everything they wanted. Almost every human activity contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Cows contribute to global warming more than cars do. Will hamburgers be outlawed? Will it be illegal to cut down trees on our property because they help combat global warming? The government in California has proposed giving the state control of home air-conditioning systems to control energy use. Even assuming that the worst predictions of catastrophe from global warming are true, it does not make sense to try to stop it — the monetary costs of doing so would be astronomical and the loss of liberty could not be tolerated. A much better approach would be to let people cope with the change instead of trying to halt it.

There is no better way to tackle the problems of global warming than by letting the free market operate. People can tackle problems best when they are free to make decisions without restrictions from the state. By dictating how people run their lives and their businesses, the state chokes the entrepreneurial spirit of a society and limits the alternative solutions that might have been available for a given problem but were snuffed out before they ever came into existence. That holds true both for dealing with the consequences of global warming and in developing technology that contributes less to the effect.

If government would just stay out of the way, humanity would not need to be coerced into helping those affected by disasters caused by global warming. The response to the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans should be testament to the power of private charity. The first help into New Orleans came from Wal-Mart while FEMA was busy in Atlanta training volunteers about sexual harassment.

And not only would the free market deal with catastrophe better than a central plan, it would also encourage ways to live more in harmony with the environment. The market is already doing this. There now exist markets for solar and wind power sources, cleaner cars, organic foods, recycled containers, and countless other products that were not even a possibility 100 years ago.

Think of what it was like 500 years ago. Plumbing was almost nonexistent. We burned trees for fuel or cut them up to make homes. Our transportation was defecating in the streets.

We now heat our homes in an immensely cleaner fashion. There is now more forest in Vermont than there was 100 years ago. Natural gas is incomparably cleaner than energy obtained from burning wood and coal. Who could have predicted the natural gas furnace 100 years ago?

Who could have foreseen the advent of hybrid vehicles? The free market has ways to alleviate social ills in the future in ways that are utterly inconceivable to us now.

Let us give environmentalists the benefit of the doubt and assume that their intentions are good. Such being the case, their arguments should be given careful attention. After all, worst-case scenarios for global warming involve a tremendous amount of change on our planet, and it is the goal of everyone to try to deal with it in the best way possible.

Let the market operate, both in curtailing greenhouse gases and in alleviating the damage done. It is the most efficient option, and it is the moral option.

Bart Frazier is program director at The Future of Freedom Foundation.

This article was originally published in the August 2008 edition of *Freedom Daily*.