

# The politics of climate change

Many of the same U.S. corporations touting popular “green” initiatives are simultaneously funding anti-climate trade groups to sway public opinion and lobbyists to push polluter-friendly legislation. Does this two-faced strategy reveal hypocrisy at the heart of America’s “green” revolution?

By Jon Gingerich

On January 27, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission made a move that had been years in the making, the result of hundreds of hours of bi-partisan feedback but a decision SEC Chairwoman Mary Schapiro referred to in the minutes before the commission’s vote as “neither surprising nor especially remarkable.” The agency issued a new series of guidelines requiring corporations to warn investors of any potential risks their investment may have in relation to climate-related changes or new environmental-protection laws.

The subsequent outcry in corporate circles then, came as quite a surprise. Opponents said the decision was politically charged; it was an affront to business; it gave companies no interpretive guidance and induced unnecessary investor fear. Finally, it relied too much on presumptions of scientific theories like global warming — theories, they said, that are still not proven.

The decision reaffirmed a wedge that has existed since the dawn of the U.S. environmental debate, realigning Democrat and Republican parties with their respective regulatory and laissez-faire stereotypes. It sounds funny to say, but reactions to the SEC decision made it sound like we’d taken a step back from the last few years of the Bush Administration, when it seemed many conservatives were finally warming up to the prospects of a green future.

“The strong reaction to the SEC is from people who weren’t expecting this, because it’s financial regulators talking about the risks of an environmental issue, which is something previous SEC leadership just wasn’t interested in,” said Jim Coburn, Senior Manager of environmental investor network Ceres.

Given corporate America’s recent embrace of all things green, you’d think disclosure would be seen as a sort of free advertisement. After all, economic data and market research during the past five years had driven them to make an environmental about-face from the naysaying ’90s. The price of solar energy had dropped; bio-fuels

became a welcome contrast to skyrocketing oil prices. By 2006 U.S. venture capital investments in clean tech hit an all-time high of \$2.5 billion. GM announced production on its plug-in hybrid the Volt. Corporations as unlikely as DuPont and General Electric began calling on Congress to enact stronger anti-polluting legislation. Computer companies Dell, Microsoft and IBM had put together global IT pact “The Green Grid” to enact data center energy efficiency. Wal-Mart’s environmental initiatives landed CEO Lee Scott on the cover of *Fortune*. Corporate America spent big bucks on green PR, they formed consortiums dedicated to cutting carbon emission, sponsored Earth Day parades, touted their green wares in brochures printed on green paper, bought Toyota Priuses, had them painted custom green. Sure, these overtures rang hollow at times, but they were a welcome surprise for the public, even when it confirmed what many have suspected for a long time: that the private sector goes green when it becomes profitable.

“Every company is driven to this by a different set of drivers,” said Joel Makower, Executive Editor of Greenbiz.com.

“Their mantra has always been ‘just tell us what to do.’ They have investments to make. But now that we’re in a new era with potential government legislation, the mantra is ‘don’t tell us what to do, we can solve these problems ourselves.’ It seems like industry and the corporate world’s consensus on green initiatives and climate change is going the opposite way of policy.”

There is a maxim in business, one that should be noted here: green strategies that add value to shareholders is one thing, green policies that impact their business is another. A historic recession coupled with the current administration’s embrace of cap-and-trade strategies put our captains of industry in a tough spot. Within months of taking office, Obama announced tougher fuel efficiency standards, repealed Bush’s changes to the Endangered Species Act, included green jobs incentives in his stimulus package and imposed limits on Federal land oil drilling. He hired Carol Browner, former Clinton EPA Administrator, as Director of the Office of Energy and

Climate Change Policy, and authorized the EPA to limit carbon emissions under the Clean Air Act. He demanded energy efficient appliances and pushed the House to pass The American Clean Energy and Security Act. On January 29 — perhaps as a result of the failure of the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen to adopt a binding, suitable environmental agreement for climate change — Obama ordered the Federal government to reduce its own emissions by 28% by 2020.

Old arguments resurfaced. Republicans and corporate business owners set down their embroidered Sierra Club hats; they retreated to their respective camps and reemerged with old tropes. The party was over.

## Industry, policy collusion

When climate change was good for business, business was good for climate change. It was easy for corporate America to endorse the green zeitgeist when a government led by former oil executives imposed expectedly lax policies. When the pendulum began to swing the other way, many in the private sector reeled against it, and the winds of a changing policy blew back the green curtain to discover many companies that talked the talk during the Bush administration didn’t exactly walk the walk. The global warming denial camp is back in full swing.

ConocoPhillips, in a well-publicized partnership with food giant Tyson to manufacture alternative fuels from animal fats, abruptly halted their plans last year when these initiatives failed to receive Federal subsidies.

ExxonMobil, absurdly praised in August by *Forbes* as “green company of the year,” was discovered the same month by the *New York Times* to have given major funding to industry groups like the now-defunct Global Climate Coalition, an organization that had silenced its own scientific reports and falsified information for more than a decade. This doesn’t include the nearly \$16 million ExxonMobil spent between 1998 and 2005 to bankroll more than 40 groups to quell claims of global warming. Exxon Mobil spent nearly \$27.5 million in lobbying last year alone, their second-highest year on the books after the election year of 2008.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the world’s largest lobbying machine, led such an unabashedly partisan campaign against cap-and-trade legislation in the House this summer that some member companies quit (Nike and Apple, to name a few; even utility company PG&E cancelled their mem-

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bership). This has not stopped many companies from continuing their long-standing association with the Chamber, including Toyota, which has made millions selling its “green” image to the American public.

The politicians funded by these industries haven’t been far behind. In December, the state of Alaska issued an RFP for PR firms, allocating \$1.5 million in state funds to wage a communications war to stop the Endangered Species Act from considering climate change an effect on species. Alaska Governor Sean Parnell, former Director of Governmental Relations for ConocoPhillips and a former Patton Boggs advisor (he represented Exxon during its Valdez oil spill litigation), has since sued the Federal government over its inclusion of polar bears as a “threatened” species, because it could hurt resource development in his state.

Meanwhile, Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski has drafted a bill to eliminate the Supreme Court’s decision to authorize the Clean Air Act to restrict the use of global warming pollutants.

In December, Oklahoma Senator and notorious global warming skeptic Jim Inhofe vowed to crash the UN Climate Change Conference with a three man “truth squad” consisting of himself and two fellow climate-denying Senators (he was unsuccessful in securing a single meeting with conference delegates).

### **Ministers of misinformation**

As always, behind the curtain of industry and policy are the tentacles of the Washington lobbying and public affairs machine, pedaling misinformation, launching ad campaigns and “grassroots” industry astroturf at the behest of big oil.

While the oil and gas industry has always been one of K Street’s biggest money makers, recent figures show it has grown to extreme proportions. Annual lobbying totals for the oil and gas industries were \$154 million in 2009, a 14% increase from 2008 and a 46% increase from 2007.

A brief historic of K Street’s boilerplate methods — not-in-my-backyard “activism,” bogus trade groups paying low-level “scientists” to speak out against the tenants of climate change — are reminiscent of big tobacco’s failed methods to dissolve the link between smoking and lung cancer. Sound like 1980s communications tactics? Consider these cases, all of which occurred in 2009:

In August, the Energy Citizens, a “grassroots” group funded by oil industry front American Petroleum Institute, held anti cap-and-trade “rallies” in 20 states comprised of oil company employees based in from area offices. The group has loudly protested the EPA’s decision to have green-

house gas emissions regulated under the Clean Air Act. API members include Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, GE, Halliburton and Shell.

Virginia-based public affairs firm Hawthorn Group put together a successful “grassroots” campaign for American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity. During the campaign a subcontracted PR firm, Bonner and Associates, forged letters from minority groups and sent them to Representative Tom Perriello (D-VA), asking him to oppose climate legislation. ACCCE members include American Electric Power, Caterpillar, GE and Union Pacific Railroad.

There’s the Heartland Institute, a noted Kyoto Protocol and “junk science” opponent which organized the latest International Conference on Climate Change to dispute the science behind global warming. Announcing the event on their website, Heartland said: “The real science and economics of climate change support the view that global warming is not a crisis and that immediate action to reduce emissions is not necessary.”

The group, which has a long history of tobacco ties, produces industry “journals” such as *Environment & Climate News*. Last year’s Climate Change conference was supported by a partnership with leading “tea party” organizer Americans for Prosperity (who are partially funded by petroleum and pipeline giant Koch Industries). Previous years’ conferences were funded by ExxonMobil.

Greenwash is a bigger industry than ever, and contrary to what its leaders say about “adding to the conversation,” these groups are not interested in the debate as to how climate change works or whether it is actually happening. TV advertisements supporting “clean coal” (there’s no such thing, at least not yet) and marketing efforts that imitate conversational authenticity to subsume the environmental debate have done a fine job of displaying to the American public how “green” the industry is while serving as atonement for fossil fuel companies and the pro-pollution agenda they secretly support. As a result, the PR and lobbying industry’s recent war on global warming has had a profound impact on the public’s beliefs and perceptions surrounding these issues.

### **Public consequences**

The consensus of climate change has always been conveniently germane to the industries that seek to lose or profit from it, and the result is a debate that is noticeably more unsettled in policy or media circles than it is in the scientific community. The problem is that, while truth is unavoidable, there is a standard formula in the communications industry for getting around this

pesky universal: repeat a lie enough times, and it becomes the truth. The three-headed hydra of industry, policy and PR has done a great deal to influence the public’s standing on the converging road where money and public policy, science and industry often meet.

An October national survey by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press discovered 57% believe there is “solid evidence” that the earth is warming, compared to 71% in 2008. Only 35% find this to be a “serious problem,” down from 44% in 2008. Only 36% now believe human activity such as fossil fuel emissions contribute to global temperatures, down from 47% the year before.

Compare these figures to years previous, and the trend is telling. In January 2007 Pew found that 77% of Americans polled believed there is “solid evidence that the earth is warming,” 55% cited global warming as a “problem,” and 83% of moderate Democrats believed the “earth is getting warmer due to human activity.”

According to Pew, America’s highest net belief in global warming came in early 2006, during the heights of one of the most anti-environmental administrations in recent history. The conclusion: our nation’s net belief in climate change is going down, as anti-climate lobbying and grassroots outreach activities are going up.

“To see these numbers drop has been stunning, but it’s a reaction to a repeated drum beat by Fox News and elsewhere for years,” said Lisa Graves, Executive Director of the Center for Media and Democracy. “What was happening behind the scenes in Washington, was that even people involved in Bush’s policy were coming to grips with climate change and knew it was something they couldn’t pretend wasn’t happening. It’s my experience that the right wing has a lot of leverage and a multi-faceted strategy to push at every single pressure point.”

### **Illogical foundations**

While the fiscal objectives of climate change denial have always been clear, the ideological underpinnings that unite the movement have been anything but. The single biggest problem with the misinformation campaign surrounding the fight against global warming is that, unlike its proponents, there has never been a cohesive narrative.

To wit, while each side will always have its supporters and detractors, there exists a unified scientific case for the principle tenants behind global warming. Global warming’s critics, on the other hand, remain disparate in their skepticism; they do not offer

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a codified explanation as to how natural phenomena alone accounts for the linear warming of the global mean surface temperature since 1850, not to mention its rapid rise in the past 25 years. Some blame periods of unusually high levels of solar radiation. Some say there is no meaningful correlation between CO<sub>2</sub> levels and the earth's temperature. Others say previous CO<sub>2</sub> estimates should make the earth warmer than it actually is. Others claim CO<sub>2</sub> is not proven to trigger water vapor feedbacks in the atmosphere. Some say IPCC climate projections are inaccurate. Others say global warming could occur without CO<sub>2</sub>. The only thing these theories have in common is their preemptive disbelief.

The right-wing media has been particularly irresponsible with this, enlisting a clown car of "expert" punditry offering NOAA balloon measurements or simply annual temperature readings to disprove global warming which, contrary to these methods, involves the reading of globally averaged temperatures near the earth's surface. These are political arguments, most which suffer from either reaffirming the consequent that variations in natural phenomena exist ("Some temperatures have dropped!" "Some places are colder than before!"), to moving the goalpost ("Not now! Business can't afford regulations!"), to *ad hominem* attacks on the entire scientific community (leaked documents showing scientists manipulated data at University of East Anglia is proof global warming is a hoax), to generally poisoning the well of public discourse ("Al Gore sure makes a lot of money from global warming!") There is a reason why this debate rages on in media and in public policy circles, yet remains a settled issue in the scientific community.

"It's exceedingly difficult, but with new media we can keep on top of the spin and call it out," said Graves. "It's an enormous challenge because I can't help but think the repeated messages at partisan rallies have convinced people that it's okay to be a flat-earther. But it's not hopeless. You need to have prevailing voices in every sector to show people the truth and have the hope that it will ring true for them."

### Setting the record straight

The idea that yelling the loudest will get the most attention no matter how incorrect your premise is, the practice of endorsing opposing theories just because they satisfy the same preconceived conclusion, does not change that fact that our fossil fuels pump 31 gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year.

It doesn't change the fact that globally averaged temperatures have increased by 1.4 degrees since 1880, that concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> in the earth's atmosphere have increased 36% since 1750, that our last two decades were the hottest in 400 years, or that average sea levels have been rising by more than a millimeter each year for the last century.

It doesn't hide the overwhelming evidence that these events did not simply coincide with our industrial age; that we have contributed significantly to the strength of the greenhouse effect in the form of increased CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from fossil fuels, aerosols or deforestation, resulting in glacial melting and higher sea levels, lowered agricultural yields and unpredictable weather patterns.

It doesn't change the fact that all the national academies of science in all the major industrialized countries in the entire world accept the theory of global warming. To be absolutely clear: there is no single scientific community left in the world that does not believe the basic tenants that human activities influence climate change.

Our decisions in this matter go beyond politics, ROI or marketing budgets. Perhaps a disagreement will always exist because its foundations are built on a fault-line between science and politics, two vastly different disciplines.

But maybe that's the whole point. Currently, companies with a history of polluting receive government credits for changing their act (Halliburton was applicable for a loophole in Bush Administration EPA policies, which allowed them to pollute water because they were extracting natural gas from it). This does nothing for companies that have been enacting environmentally-friendly policies the entire time.

Instead, lobbying groups should push for legislation that gives more Federal subsidies to these companies, and should enact grassroots campaigns to tell government to reward corporations that develop renewable energy, reduce fossil fuel dependence, decentralize the existing renewable grid and support research into nuclear and nuclear fusion technologies.

"What we need is carrots and sticks in the form of financial incentives," Makower said. "Public opinion is fickle and global warming deniers have done a great job of creating confusion. Also, there's a failure in the environmental movement to make a compelling case: so much of what we talk about is fear-based. What's remarkable is amidst all the debates and confusion on the policy side, some companies are really driving the climate conversation. Pleasing all companies is impossible, but somewhere there is a policy." ●



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