

EDITORIAL

Priorities for a New President: Energy, Climate Change, and Transportation

Kelly Tzoumis

On July 1, 2008, Jim Montgomery and I became co-Editors-in-Chief of *Environmental Practice*, alternating as lead editor for different periods of time. Together, we comprise a combination of science and policy that appears to fit the journal's mission. This editorial is my voice and is written from a policy standpoint as I begin to look toward the calendar year's end, reflecting upon where the United States is going with respect to environmental issues and, internationally, with regard to leadership. As *Environmental Practice's* last editorial for 2008, I will make some predictions for 2009 as well.

At the time of this writing in late summer, just before the national political party conventions to officially nominate candidates for President of the United States, the American public appears to lack a clear consensus. There is no clear front-runner at this time, and the candidates have enough variance in their policy positions to offer some choices to the voter on a number of issues—even though, as the November election approaches, the candidates continue to adapt and may change their views to court the electorate. Both major party candidates have positions on energy security in the future, but neither has made energy independence a major campaign issue. Yes, both have toured nuclear plants, made statements about funding alternative energy sources, and have positions on drilling in areas previously considered restricted, but the American public still does not have a clear idea of the nature of US energy policy after either of these candidates is elected.



The political party conventions have historically provided a “bounce” in the polls and assisted the electorate in connecting to a candidate, but these events do not clarify the policy issues. As a result, some discussion (both from our political leaders and in general) focusing on a couple of the major issues facing the country is warranted. Although there are several issues that could be mentioned, the ones that come to mind requiring leadership include the areas of energy, climate change, and transportation infrastructure at the local level. These, not surprisingly, are related and reinforce each other as policy concerns.

As a country, we should not be surprised at the US's current energy problems. It certainly is not the first time we have seen national policy discussions surrounding a potentially greater diversity of energy dependence on sources other than oil. What is unknown to most of the American public is that, for many years and under different presidents, the US Department of Energy and its predecessors have authored national energy policies. The discussions

and debates on national energy policy have not been as prevalent in American discourse as other public policies, such as education policy (particularly the No Child Left Behind Act) or health care, but energy has become a salient issue and will remain so, as long as the price of oil stays high. Energy policy has an unstable position on the US policy agenda for a variety of reasons (part of a more detailed discussion not presented here). Evidence of this includes the increasing popularity of hybrid and smaller cars over larger vehicles as the price of gasoline rises over \$3.00. This is clearly a shift in consumer behavior, literally observable from our streets. Other pieces of evidence are considerations by major employers of a four-day work week, more people walking, the rise of local food sources, and, everywhere, the talk of being “green.” Major housing renovations in urban centers are promoted as “green housing”—not just single family homes, but also condominiums and apartments. Green is cool, as evidenced by green conferences, green products, and green living magazines and television shows. My hope is that our new political leadership will take this public trend and translate it into real policy responses, thus avoiding the risk that this current “greening” of America will be a fad leaving no permanent positive policy changes (such as those of the 1970s). The time is ripe for real policy change; the ideal time for us to wean ourselves from our addiction to oil is with a new president and Congress in 2009. The one potentially good outcome from this winter's high energy costs may be the American public's demand for more stable and sustainable sources of energy.

Related to energy issues, and also staring us in the face, is global climate change. As a nation, we have grappled with this policy for quite some time. Granted, there is still some variance of opinion on the eminence of this issue for policy makers. Evidence that climate change has been accepted as a concern, however—besides the opinion polls, treaties, and a Nobel Prize recogniz-

ing it as an international concern—is its institutionalization in our culture. For instance, nonprofit organizations are hiring policy analysts to work on climate change, universities frequently have speakers and courses on climate change, the Supreme Court has taken a case on regulation of a greenhouse gas, numerous conferences on the subject have taken place, and there has been a significant proliferation of literature on the subject. Of course, the real problem for political leaders who address climate change is the long-term nature of its consequences, and even incrementally occurring consequences would vary according to region and without direct causal links to convince those still not concerned. My hope for 2009 is that we have significant policy movement on the curbing of pollutants connected to climate change, but this will probably be the most difficult of the policy issues to address because it affects many opposing interests.

Finally, related to both energy independence and climate change is the issue of transportation, really a subset of the en-

ergy issue. At a minimum, the transportation infrastructure in large US metropolitan areas needs a significant redesign and update for travel efficiency, as well as collective movement. Currently, the roadways are built for automobile transit with a low capacity of travelers. More light rail, trains, and bus transit would provide travelers with viable alternatives to individual automobile transportation. In addition, the layout of many of these urban areas does not reflect the housing and employment location trends that have taken place over the last several decades. Thus, often the phrase “reverse commute” is outdated, because traffic has no time-based pattern to its movement, either towards or away from a central business district. The result is overconsumption of gasoline, air pollution, and significant amounts of time wasted in transit. Although transportation is clearly more of a local or regional issue when compared with energy independence and climate change, it does require political leadership at all levels of government to implement revisions to infrastructure. A real energy strategy for the country would necessarily include some local and regional level pol-

icy adjustments with respect to transportation. On a larger scale, high-speed rail alternatives and addressing the structure of our airline industry may also be issues on the agenda for 2009.

As we conclude 2008, my hope is, indeed, that these three large issues of energy independence, climate change, and transportation will be important components of the newly-elected president’s domestic and international agendas. There are many other environmental issues that also are contenders for careful consideration, but these three issues appear to be the ones that affect our future in the most profound manner for generations.

Happy Holidays and New Year.

Address correspondence to Kelly Tzoumis, Professor and Chairperson, Department of Public Policy Studies, DePaul University, 2352 N. Clifton Ave., Clifton 150.23, Chicago, IL 60614; (fax) 773-325-4062; (email) kellytzoumis@ameritech.net.