

The Australian

Climate alarmists pose real threat to freedom

Vaclav Klaus | *March 12, 2008*

A WEEK ago, I gave a speech at an official gathering at Prague Castle commemorating the 60th anniversary of the 1948 communist putsch in the former Czechoslovakia. One of the arguments of my speech, quoted in all the leading newspapers in the country the next morning, went as follows: Future dangers will not come from the same source. The ideology will be different. Its essence will nevertheless be identical: the attractive, pathetic, at first sight noble idea that transcends the individual in the name of the common good, and the enormous self-confidence on the side of its proponents about their right to sacrifice the man and his freedom in order to make this idea reality. What I had in mind was, of course, environmentalism and its present strongest version, climate alarmism.

As an economist, I have to start by stressing the obvious. Carbon dioxide emissions do not fall from heaven. Their volume (ECO2) is a function of gross domestic product per capita (which means of the size of economic activity, SEA), of the number of people (POP) and of the emissions intensity (EI), which is the amount of CO2 emissions per dollar of GDP. This is usually expressed in a simple relationship: $ECO2 = EI \times SEA \times POP$. What this relationship tells is simple: If we really want to decrease ECO2 we have to either stop the economic growth and thus block further rise in the standard of living, stop the population growth, or make miracles with the emissions intensity.

I am afraid there are people who want to stop the economic growth, the rise in the standard of living (though not their own) and the ability of man to use the expanding wealth, science and technology for solving the actual pressing problems of mankind, especially of the developing countries. This ambition goes very much against past human experience which has always been connected with a strong motivation to better human conditions. There is no reason to make the change just now, especially with arguments based on such incomplete and faulty science. Human wants are unlimited and should stay so. Asceticism is a respectable individual attitude but should not be forcefully imposed upon the rest of us.

I am also afraid that the same people, imprisoned in the Malthusian tenets and in their own megalomaniacal ambitions, want to regulate and constrain demographic development, which is something only the totalitarian regimes have until now dared to experiment with. Without resisting it we would find ourselves on the slippery road to serfdom. The freedom to have children without regulation and control is one of the undisputable human rights.

There are people among the global-warming alarmists who would protest against being included in any of these categories, but who do call for a radical decrease in carbon

dioxide emissions. It can be achieved only by means of a radical decline in the emissions intensity.

This is surprising because we probably believe in technical progress more than our opponents. We know, however, that such revolutions in economic efficiency (and emissions intensity is part of it) have never been realised in the past and will not happen in the future either. To expect anything like that is a non-serious speculation.

I recently looked at the European CO2 emissions data covering the period 1990-2005, the Kyoto protocol era. You don't need huge computer models to very easily distinguish three different types of countries in Europe.

In the less developed countries, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain, which during this period were trying to catch up with the economic performance of the more developed EU countries, rapid economic growth led to a 53 per cent increase in CO2 emissions. In the post-communist countries, which went through a radical economic restructuring with the heavy industry disappearing, GDP drastically declined. These countries decreased their CO2 emissions in the same period by 32 per cent. In the EU's slow-growing if not stagnating countries (excluding Germany where its difficult to eliminate the impact of the fact that the east German economy almost ceased to exist in that period) CO2 emissions increased by 4 per cent.

The huge differences in these three figures are fascinating. And yet there is a dream among European politicians to reduce CO2 emissions for the entire EU by 30 per cent in the next 13 years compared to the 1990 level.

What does it mean? Do they assume that all countries would undergo a similar economic shock as was experienced by the central and eastern European countries after the fall of communism? Do they assume that economically weaker countries will stop their catching-up process? Do they intend to organise a decrease in the number of people living in Europe? Or do they expect a technological revolution of unheard-of proportions?

What I see in Europe, the US and other countries is a powerful combination of irresponsibility and wishful thinking together with the strong belief in the possibility of changing the economic nature of things through a radical political project.

This brings me to politics. As a politician who personally experienced communist central planning of all kinds of human activities, I feel obliged to bring back the already almost forgotten arguments used in the famous plan-versus-market debate in the 1930s in economic theory (between Mises and Hayek on the one side and Lange and Lerner on the other), the arguments we had been using for decades until the moment of the fall of communism. The innocence with which climate alarmists and their fellow-travellers in politics and media now present and justify their ambitions to mastermind human society belongs to the same fatal conceit. To my great despair, this is not sufficiently challenged, neither in the field of social sciences, nor in the field of climatology.

The climate alarmists believe in their own omnipotency, in knowing better than millions of rationally behaving men and women what is right or wrong. They believe in their own ability to assemble all relevant data into their Central Climate Change Regulatory Office equipped with huge supercomputers, in the possibility of giving adequate instructions to hundreds of millions of individuals and institutions.

We have to restart the discussion about the very nature of government and about the relationship between the individual and society. We need to learn the uncompromising lesson from the inevitable collapse of communism 18 years ago. It is not about climatology. It is about freedom.

Vaclav Klaus is President of the Czech Republic. This is an edited extract from a speech he gave on March 4 to the 2008 International Conference on Climate Change in New York.