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## Up Next for Debate: Carbon Costs

By Andrew C. Revkin

A sequel to the ballyhooed debate in 2007 over the motion that “Global Warming is Not a Crisis” has been scheduled in New York City in January, this time exploring a new premise: “Major Reductions in Carbon Emissions are Not Worth the Money.” Those in favor of the motion (some additions may come, organizers say) will be the “skeptical environmentalist” Bjorn Lomborg; Philip Stott, the British biogeographer who has become a prominent critic of global warming worriers; and Peter W. Huber, the Manhattan Institute scholar, lawyer and mechanical engineer who has written that energy waste is unavoidable and beneficial.

Those against will be Daniel M. Kammen, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, focused on renewable and “appropriate” energy technology and a senior energy adviser to the Obama campaign; Oliver Tickell, an environmental writer/campaigner in search of what he calls Kyoto2, a framework for controlling greenhouse gases that is effective, efficient and equitable; and Adam Werbach, who gained fame as the youngest president of the Sierra Club (elected at 23), but now is focused on “blue” marketing for business growth framed around sustainability, as the head of Saatchi & Saatchi S. I’ll have to ask him about how that works.

The debate is put on by Intelligence Squared US. (The series is an initiative of the Rosenkranz Foundation, led by Robert Rosenkranz, who at the first climate debate made his views on human-driven climate change quite clear; see the bottom of this post for his introduction to that evening.)

Frankly, the debate motion for the January event is so laden with interpretations that I’m not sure there will be a satisfactory outcome. How much is “major”? How much would major cuts cost (a necessary question if someone is to judge that it’s too much)? Farther down you can read what I wrote about the 2007 debate, which featured Michael Crichton, who died this month.

I’ll try to attend and write on the event, but I would rather see a debate on this motion: **There is no downside to an ambitious, sustained “energy quest” — from the living room to the board room to the laboratory to the classroom to the Oval Office — aimed at advancing humanity without undermining ecological integrity of the planet.**

What kind of energy or climate debate would you like to see, and what outcome? Here’s what I wrote about the 2007 event:

From my article on global warming in AARP - The Magazine (July/August, 2007):

In the intellectual equivalent of a pro-wrestling “smackdown,” two teams of combatants enter a plush, packed auditorium on the Upper East Side for a debate titled “Global Warming Is Not a Crisis,” staged by a group called Intelligence Squared U.S. The climate-change debunkers include Richard S. Lindzen, 67, a meteorologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who claims that human-caused warming is inconsequential, and Michael Crichton, 64, the novelist and moviemaker. Crichton stirred the climate debate with a 2004 novel, *State of Fear*, in which the bad guys were radical environmentalists trying to scare the world about global warming in order to line their pockets. Opposed are three climate scientists: one from NASA, one from a leading university, and one from a private group called the Union of Concerned Scientists. Most of the night focuses on their differences, mainly concerning the value of quick, aggressive cuts in greenhouse gas emissions.

Richard C.J. Somerville, 66, a veteran University of California, San Diego, climatologist, attacks the “not a crisis” position. “[A crisis] does not mean catastrophe or alarmism,” he says. “It means a crucial or decisive moment, a turning point, a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent. Our task tonight is to persuade you that global warming is indeed a crisis in exactly that sense. The science warns

us that continuing to fuel the world using present technology will bring dangerous and possibly surprising climate changes by the end of this century, if not sooner.”

But Crichton insists that pressing real-time problems trump an iffy, long-term one. “Every day 30,000 people on this planet die of the diseases of poverty,” he tells the crowd. “A third of the planet doesn’t have electricity. We have a billion people with no clean water. We have half a billion people going to bed hungry every night. Do we care about this? It seems that we don’t. It seems that we would rather look a hundred years into the future than pay attention to what’s going on now.”

What’s largely lost in the sparring — Crichton’s team prevails in an audience vote — is that the debate has not been about whether humans are contributing to rising temperatures. Crichton and Lindzen, both of whom consider former vice president Al Gore and his allies alarmists, readily agree that human-generated greenhouse gases warm the earth.

A few paragraphs that were trimmed are worth a look now:

“Is the globe warming? Yes,” Crichton says. “Is the greenhouse effect real? Yes. Is carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas, being increased by man? Yes. Would we expect this warming to have an effect? Yes.”

Summing up, he says that in his view other real-time problems, particularly global poverty, trump whatever long-term risk is posed by man-made warming, and that the slow natural pace of society’s shift away from dirty fuels like coal toward cleaner ones will take care of the problem in any case.

“Decreasing our carbon, increasing our hydrogen, makes perfect sense, makes environmental sense, makes political sense, makes geopolitical sense,” Crichton says. “And we’ll continue to do it without any legislation, without anything forcing us to do it, as nothing forced us to get off horses.”

Mr. Crichton was forcefully attacked by energy and climate campaigners for pushing global warming into the realm of overinflated risks.

I’ll be writing lots more on another theme explored by Mr. Crichton, the importance of creating flexible approaches to complicated systems that are important to human affairs — systems where what is not known is likely to be as critical as what is understood. Whatever you think of Mr. Crichton’s writing on environmentalism and climate, I encourage you to read the 2005 speech at the preceding link and weigh in here on what he says.

As promised, here’s how Robert Rosenkranz introduced the 2007 climate debate (video and transcript):

...[W]hy this particular topic? Senator Barbara Boxer, Al Gore have assured us that on this particular topic the debate is over. Well, we took that as throwing down the gantlet and I personally am cynical enough to think that perhaps there’s a distinction between science and political science. Um, and maybe a side that feels like there is nothing to debate, might feel that there are perhaps some inconvenient truths on the other side that they would prefer not to deal with. I’m old enough to remember when there was a scientific consensus on global cooling, and this was in the 1970s with all kinds of alarmist data on that subject. [*Just fyi: There’s a challenge to this popular notion on Realclimate.org.*]

I’m enough of a businessman to know that the modeling and the use of the computer, uh, algorithms and forecasting the future is a very, very difficult undertaking. I mean, if one could predict the weather or patterns of storms even a year in advance it would be worth billions and billions of dollars to people engaged in energy trading or, uh, or, insurance underwriting and a whole bunch of other pursuits. And yet it can’t really be effectively done. So tonight’s debate, I think, is addressing issues that for me are very real and, which, at Intelligence Squared we feel can use some serious enlightenment, first of all, on the science of it. Does science really have the ability to tell us with, with a good degree of reliability what is going to happen to our climate over a hundred year period? And secondly, the economics. This all leads in effect to public policies that say, We should invest money now for benefits in the future. Well, that always poses the traditional questions of, well, what are the costs? What are the benefits? What are the alternatives? What are the risks of action? What are the risks of inaction? So there are a whole welter of economic aspects that I think, hopefully tonight we’re going to get some enlightenment on as well.