4.1 Oiling the Wheels of Government

The fossil fuel industry worked for decades to influence government policy, and at the end of 2000 all their deceptions and machinations paid a huge dividend when they succeeded in getting a couple of oilmen into the White House. The dismal consequences of that success have been documented with passion by the environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. in his book *Crimes against Nature: How George W. Bush and His Corporate Pals Are Plundering the Country and Hijacking Our Democracy*.

While campaigning as a presidential candidate George W. Bush unveiled 'A Comprehensive National Energy Policy' in which he promised that, if elected, he would 'develop legislation that will establish mandatory reduction targets for emissions of four main pollutants: sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, mercury, and carbon dioxide'.¹ But within two months of taking office he assured Republican senators that he opposed the Kyoto Protocol and did *not* believe 'that the government should impose on power plants mandatory emissions reductions for carbon dioxide, which is not a "pollutant" under the Clean Air Act'.² Although the US had signed the Kyoto Protocol, the Bush administration declined to send it to the Senate for ratification.

The obvious question is: how on earth could a 'comprehensive' national energy policy *not* require emissions reductions for CO₂, as Bush had said it would? One reason was that his election campaign had been well funded by the fossil fuel industries, and to keep that money flowing in he had to pay back. The industry had been especially generous to Bush in order to ensure that Al Gore, who *would* have cracked down on carbon emissions, wouldn't get elected. One coal company, Peabody Energy, donated \$846,000 to federal campaigns, 98% of it to Republicans.

If massive financial support from the coal industry hadn't let Bush carry the Democrats' stronghold of West Virginia, he would have lost the election to Gore.³ (Bush did lose the popular vote, and it was only the Supreme Court's partisan decision to stop the recount in Florida that handed him the election.) Their generous campaign donations effectively bought the coal industry executives a place at the table where the nation's energy policy for the next eight years would be decided.

The second reason for the disappearance of CO₂ emissions from the national energy policy was the vice president, Dick ('Vice') Cheney. Although not as much of an oilman as Bush, Cheney had just come from being CEO of Halliburton, a multinational corporation that provides 'services to the oil and natural gas industry'.⁴ On becoming vice-president,

Cheney took over the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), and after his pals at Exxon asked the CEQ to drop three US scientists they didn't like from the IPCC, Cheney took care of it for them.⁵

One of these scientists, Michael MacCracken, had to go because of his key role in a legally mandated 'National Assessment' report commissioned by the federal government, which the fossil fuel industry found especially inconvenient: Climate Change Impacts on the United States: The Potential Consequences of Climate Variability and Change. ⁶ The report is comprehensive—the 'Overview' alone runs to 160 pages—and was authored and reviewed by teams of eminent scientists together with 'experts drawn from governments, universities, industry, and non-governmental organizations' (among the latter two groups are the World Resources Institute, Glaxo Wellcome Inc., the World Bank, and Monsanto).

The assessment was based on a vast array of evidence, including the extant IPCC reports, and provides informative scenarios based on reputable climate models of the impacts that climate change was expected to have on all regions of the United States. Even though the report focused on adaptation rather than mitigation, and projected benefits for some parts of the US, it found that 'climatic vulnerabilities' would affect most of the country—and made it clear that GHG emissions were going to have to be reduced.

Since this would cramp business as usual for the fossil fuel industries, they funded a lawsuit filed by the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the Heartland Institute (and several other plaintiffs including Senator James Inhofe) which attempted to suppress the National Assessment on the grounds that it violated some minor procedural regulations. The outcome of a second suit filed by the CEI in 2003 gave the Bush administration the pretext it needed to ignore the National Assessment, even though it had been endorsed by the prestigious National Academy of Sciences, and proceed with business as usual.

Not only can you get rid of the wrong scientists if you have the money, you can also get the right ones into places where their testimony will be useful. For example, in exchange for the generous donations they receive from the fossil fuel industries, chairs of congressional committees that deal with climate and energy issues invite the sceptical scientists promoted by the conservative think tanks to give testimony that will 'balance' that of the real climate scientists they are obliged to invite. A 2003 study of congressional hearings on global warming showed a marked increase in testimony by sceptical scientists allied to industry after the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, and a corresponding decline in the percentage of conventional scientists testifying.⁹

Another tactic is simply to dispense with the scientists and their advice altogether. Bush's 'Comprehensive Energy Policy', which *excluded* any attempts to reduce carbon emissions and promoted relaxing regulations on air pollution, was basically developed behind closed doors by Cheney and Republican colleagues at the behest of representatives of the fossil fuel industries, the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases in the country, with no scientists or environmental experts participating. As the EPA representative on Cheney's Energy Task Force described its 'ideology': 'It's simple: you don't put limits on greenhouse gas pollution, because that might put limits on coal and oil—and that would hurt industry's performance.'¹⁰

This outrageous situation began to draw such severe criticism from so many directions that the Republicans might have been obliged to backpedal—but the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 diverted the nation's attention. The new goal was now to reduce the country's dependence on Middle East oil, and this brought great benefits to the coal industry as well as domestic oil and gas production. People had more important things to be concerned about than continued warnings from climate scientists.

In 2003 the Bush administration finally received the boon they'd been waiting for, when many years of investment by fossil fuel concerns in contrarian scientists who would produce convenient results finally paid off. The reward came in the form of a review of the 'proxy records' for world temperatures over the past thousand years, which concluded that, 'Across the world, many records reveal that the 20th century is probably not the warmest nor a uniquely extreme climatic period of the last millennium.' Even more welcome than a demonstration that global warming isn't human-caused was the reassurance that warming isn't even taking place! The authors of the review article were Willie Soon and Sallie Baliunas, and since its title is so long, I'll refer to it as SB2003 for short.

When the review was published, White House operatives were already in the process of expurgating a document from the EPA with the title *Report on the Environment*, deleting passages that didn't fit with their pro-business, anti-environmental agenda. When the review of temperature proxies came to their attention, they deleted the evidence the Report presented for rising temperatures and inserted a reference to SB2003 instead. Eventually the EPA was obliged to drop the section on climate change from its Report altogether.

A deputy in the White House Council of Environmental Quality recommended SB2003 with gleeful zeal in a memo to the Office of the Vice President, portraying it as the perfect pretext for doing nothing about carbon emissions except to dismantle regulations that restricted them.

The recent paper of Soon-Baliunas contradicts a dogmatic view held by many in the climate science community that the past century was the warmest in the past millennium and signals human induced 'global warming.' ... We plan to begin to refer to this study in Administration communications on the science of global climate change. ... With both the National Academy and IPCC holding that the 20th Century is the warmest of the past thousand years, this recent study begins to provide a counterbalance. ¹³

I leave it to the reader to decide whether this deputy actually believed that a minor survey of the literature by two non-climate scientists could even begin to counterbalance the authority of the IPCC, involving several hundred 'authors and expert reviewers' from more than fifty-six countries, from Argentina to Zimbabwe.

In any case the CEQ did begin to refer to this study, ad nauseam, so that it became the centrepiece of the Bush administration's misinformation campaign on global warming. Indeed SB2003 turned out, in retrospect, to have disastrous consequences—unprecedented for an article published in a minor scientific journal. The impact was pernicious because, as the next appendix demonstrates, the Soon and Baliunas study is a highly misleading and fundamentally flawed piece of 'science'. 14 It's basically a Monckton piece, but performed by actual scientists.

Nevertheless, the war on science continues, even as—or rather *because*—the findings of the climate scientists make it clearer by the week that burning fossil fuels is frying the planet. When Trump became president he surrounded himself with climate deniers, and his administration set out to undermine the work of the EPA and censor and purge government scientists who insists on presenting the facts and figures rather than toeing the Republican party denial line.¹⁵

Notes

- George W. Bush, Campaign speech at Saginaw, Michigan, 'A Comprehensive National Energy Policy', 29 September 2000, http://www.historycommons.org/context.jsp?item=BushPromiseMandatoryEmissionCuts#BushPromiseMandatoryEmissionCuts (21 Apr 2015).
- ² George W. Bush, Letter to Members of the US Senate, March 13, 2001, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45811 (21 Apr 2015).
- ³ See Goodell, *Big Coal*, 187, xvii-xviii.
- On Halliburton's reputation, see The Reputation Institute, 'America's 10 Least Reputable Companies', Forbes website, April 2011, http://www.forbes.com/2011/04/04/least-reputable-companies-leadership-sales-leadership_slide_6.html (21 Apr 2015).
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- National Assessment Synthesis Team, Climate Change Impacts on the United States: The Potential Consequences of Climate Variability and Change, Overview (Washington DC: US Global Change Research Program, 2000), available at https://downloads.globalchange.gov/nca/nca-2000-report-overview.pdf (accessed ***).
- ⁷ For the lawsuit, see the 'Complaint for Declarative Relief', pdf available from http://www.cei.org/pdf/2300.pdf.
- 8 See Mooney, The Republican War, 95-99.
- ⁹ Aaron M. McCright and Riley E. Dunlap, 'Defeating Kyoto: The Conservative Movement's Impact on U.S. Climate Change Policy', *Social Problems*, vol. 50, no. 3 (2003): 348-73.
- Jeremy Symons, Environmental Protection Agency, cited in Dickinson, 'The Secret Campaign'.
- ¹¹ Soon and Baliunas, 'Proxy Climatic and Environmental Changes', 89.
- U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 'Political Interference with Climate Change Science under the Bush Administration' (December 2007), ***.
- Philip Cooney, memorandum to Kevin O'Donovan, 21 April 2003, cited in US House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 'Political Interference with Climate Change Science under the Bush Administration' (December 2007), 22-23, pdf available from http://earthjustice.org/sites/default/files/library/reports/house-of-

- $representative \hbox{-}2007-majority-report-on-climate-change-science.pdf (accessed \hbox{*}).$
- See the Wikipedia article 'Soon and Baliunas Controversy', which refers to most of the relevant sources, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soon_and_Baliunas_controversy (accessed ***).
- ¹⁵ Emily Holden, 'War on science: Trump administration muzzles climate experts, critics say', *The Guardian*, 26 July 2019.