

Trump's Environmental Reset

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Abstract:

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Full text:

Anti-Trump protests continue to swell across the country, but what best sums up the president-elect's challenge was a Monday night tantrum barely noticed by the press. Climate activists in Washington, D.C., waited until dark, then beamed huge images onto the headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency. Their demand? That Donald Trump pick someone other than Myron Ebell to lead the EPA.

Mr. Ebell is a whip-smart policy wonk at the Competitive Enterprise Institute. He has spent years at the epicenter of conservative efforts to combat backward environmental regulations. His appointment to manage Mr. Trump's EPA transition team was an inspired and encouraging surprise.

On the left it provoked a complete meltdown. Environmental groups whipped up tens of thousands of petition signatures demanding Mr. Trump ditch the "climate denier." Students at Georgetown and Harvard demonstrated against the appointment. There's even an online hashtag: #RebelAgainstEbell.

The political class is obsessed with whom Mr. Trump will pick for plum cabinet posts: the future secretaries of state, defense, Treasury. Inside activist groups and corporate boardrooms, the preoccupation is who will occupy the positions with the greatest bearing on the economic bottom line: the secretaries of labor, health and human services, energy.

The biggest battle lines will be drawn over the dismantling of Mr. Obama's environmental regime. This is where the president's crushing rules have arguably done the most broad-based damage to the economy. It is also where the progressive left is most organized -- and most emotional.

Lifting environmental burdens is (along with tax reform) where conservatives see the most sweeping upside for growth. Talk to Mr. Trump's economic advisers: They understand that the advent of fracking and new drilling techniques -- the ability to tap untold reserves of oil and gas -- represents a global paradigm shift that can reset America's economy and foreign dealings. President Obama's willful decision to ignore this was as if Bill Clinton had opted the country out of the internet revolution.

Mr. Trump gets that. The early audacity of his thinking, as represented by Mr. Ebell, has inspired the right, even as it has incensed the left. For years Republicans have been running scared on the environment, cringing under attacks from activists, constantly seeking to look "green" and play down their energy ambitions.

Not so Mr. Trump, the first Republican president in the modern era who seems willing to turn the formula on its head and adopt a position in keeping with other energy-rich nations. The Norways and Canadas of the world embrace their energy abundance and make it an economic priority, even as they also take steps to protect air and water quality. That appears to be the Trump approach.

This is a man who reportedly has put Forrest Lucas, co-founder of Lucas Oil, on his short list to lead the Interior Department. Or, if not Mr. Lucas, former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. Or Oklahoma oilman Harold Hamm. Mr. Hamm is also potentially up for secretary of energy, as is venture capitalist Robert Grady. Then there is Mr.

Ebell, who could be in line to run the EPA.

The left is so dumbfounded, it can barely formulate a reply. Asked in a Nov. 9 article how he would respond to the Trump administration, 350.org founder Bill McKibben told the Washington Post, he didn't know: "The path forward is not all that clear to me." The president of Friends of the Earth, Erich Pica, was more forthcoming, saying that the movement would go back to the anti-Bush playbook of utilizing "the courts, the Senate filibuster," hounding appointees and galvanizing "the public to take action."

That pressure seems to be having some effect. During the campaign Mr. Trump vowed to pull the U.S. out of the Paris climate accords, but this week he backtracked and said he would keep an "open mind" about staying in.

All the more reason why Mr. Trump needs to appoint bold and unconventional advisers, who will reset baseline thinking and won't back down under unrelenting pressure. The president-elect's promise to "cancel job-killing restrictions on the production of American energy" will require sweeping action: Ending involvement in the Paris accord. Squashing the Clean Power Plan. Zeroing out clean-energy subsidies. Reopening federal drilling areas. Killing regulations on flaring and fracking. Opening up exports. Approving vital infrastructure like pipelines and liquid natural gas terminals.

All of this is eminently possible. Mr. Obama knew the public wasn't behind his expensive regulations, so he went around Congress to implement most of his agenda by executive fiat. That makes it easier to undo. At the same time, the sort of dramatic reset that Mr. Trump contemplates will require the cooperation of Congress and the backing of the public, both of which will be nervous. The new administration will need to intellectually engage the activists and unabashedly sell reform.

Mr. Trump's choices for the Energy Department, the Interior Department and the EPA will show whether he is serious about busting up Washington's liberal mind-set and jump-starting the economy. These are the picks -- and the confirmation fights -- to watch.

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