Obama administration and eco-hope: business as usual with more road building?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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"What's good for General Motors is good for America" may still be one of our highest laws. Is the new era of hope and change, when we get specific, dependent on more cars?

Culture Change Letter #211, Nov. 7, 2008 - In the 1990s, the heart of the environmental movement -- the grassroots and direct-action troops -- learned quite a bit about their opposition: corporate America with the Clinton administration in its pocket.

Some environmentalists were disillusioned after a promising 1993 post-election "honeymoon," later crying "date rape." Others were not surprised; we immediately faulted the Sierra Club's DC lobbyist for claiming in 1992 that Clinton/Gore would "put the pedal to the metal" on environmental protection.

David Brower, founder of Friends of the Earth, placed Bill Clinton atop Ronald Reagan for damage to the environment. Part of this was made clear from "free trade" deals as well as environmental compromises that were not necessitated by the power of Republicans.

If the Obama administration is not to be a sort of environmental repeat of the Clinton regime -- assuming the economy and nation could somehow stay in one piece thanks to secure petroleum supplies -- what can be different this time around, and how? As we've already said this week in this column, the goal of "cleaner cars" compares very poorly with the FDR/citizenry spirit of "When you drive alone you're riding with Hitler." In fact, more cars is unrealistic and irresponsible when considering oil's peaking in global extraction. "What's good for General Motors is good for America" may still be one of our highest laws. Is the new era of hope and change, when we get specific, dependent on more cars?

The ideal of compromise falls apart when we go in the wrong direction; cleaner cars may have been a great stride decades ago, but one effect of more efficient cars decades ago was the unintended, vast increase in per-capita miles traveled and in purchasing second or third cars, combined with human population growth.

Maybe Obama would secretly have loved during his campaign to call for automobile workers to be retrained, and factories retooled, to make bicycles instead of cars. Now we can find out his beliefs after he's out from under competitive campaign attack, and he has received more briefings on cars vis-a-vis energy and ecological realities. We do know that Obama's staff is thoroughly briefed on peak oil and petrocollapse (I was on Capitol Hill in February), but a new concept can take months to sink in.

Now we offer further insight on the potential for eco-hope after eight years of Bush/Cheney. The Clinton regime approved, after the fact, of the 1997 torture of peaceful protesters doing sit-ins for the ancient redwoods. This pepper-spraying in the eyes via cotton swabs was actually opposed by the Supreme Court and eventually ruled unconstitutional and excessive force. But this was not considered so by Clinton and his Justice Department. Such a human-rights lapse cannot happen with Obama and his circle; he was a civil rights lawyer whereas Hillary Clinton had litigated for incinerator companies spewing dioxins.

It is easy to misunderstand, however, what society may really need, when we all grow up conditioned to believe road building is synonymous with progress. We reveal in this report our recent memo to one of the President Elect's key advisers, regarding investing in new roads -- called for by the candidate last month.

With the Obama White House taking shape with Clinton-veterans, it is fair to assume that the overall policy-byword will again be economic growth. It will be handled differently than the Republicans did, but how differently from the Clinton years? It has to be quite different simply from the financial meltdown now taking place, and the prospect of massive unemployment and social unrest. But let us go deeper:

The vicious shift in income distribution from Reagan onward has been remarkable, changing the face of the USA from middle-class to that of extremely rich people lording over the huge, growing underclass. The middle class is either a paycheck away from disaster or comfortable only because of risen home equity, in millions of cases. Despite this disturbing "big story," our economic history and present woes are not the biggest story we have to deal with. It only appears so, as the fallout of greed and deregulation hit. The faltering economy was the crux of the campaign that unseated the Republicans. However, stepping back, it is really our gluttonous resource consumption and ecological destruction that comprise the biggest story of all. The common perception is that right-wing pressure for widening the income gap is our biggest threat, as if a "leftist" kinder, gentler corporate state is alright. Neither version is ethical or sustainable.

The excitement of the season's political news -- with the historic advent of a black man making it to the White House (for all the wrong that the White House innately represents) -- has dominated the good news, and the financial meltdown has dominated the bad news, but all that has been a distraction:

We are in a terrible mess that cannot really be fixed by elections. More fundamental would be, normally, to fix the nation's predicament of energy, overpopulation and ecocide; however, that can no longer be done by policy. We are already over the ecological and economic cliff, and have yet to feel the real impact of the fall. Lest one believe this is mere speculation, or, worse, "wishful thinking," here's the scientific basis handed to the government in 2005: The Hirsch Report on peak oil and mitigation. The main finding of this high-powered report for the U.S. Dept. of Energy was that we cannot prepare for peak oil as it hits, when decades of infrastructure change were required beforehand. (1)

As to the ability of a new regime to make changes when we have peak oil and climate distortion at play, it's beyond these people to solve the situation, however good or bad the new players are. The horse is out of the barn. We may as well embrace the new world and go with profound change on all levels.

"Invest in new roads..." - Senator Obama, Ohio, Oct. 2008

A few days before the election I emailed the following to a key Obama adviser. I decided to not share it with anyone until after the election; now I don't have to justify its appearance by pointing out that the Republicans are a little worse than Democrats when it comes to promoting urban sprawl by investing in new roads.

As you may know, there's not enough highway money even in the most lavish-spending years to repair the roads and bridges we have, let alone build more. But building more is where the big profits are, for the various players such as land speculators and developers as well as oil companies and car manufacturers. This is why maintenance of existing roads and bridges just slips and slips every year. The big heavy trucks are the worst offenders wearing down the concrete and asphalt (originally a byproduct of refining that needed to be put somewhere or else the refiners could not produce what they really wanted to sell).

The Alliance for a Paving Moratorium (APM) was active nationally and in Canada on this issue from 1990-2001. Our website http://culturechange.org has a lot of information on this and is the successor to APM.

I was alarmed to hear the Senator say in the Ohio "closing argument" speech last month that the nation should "invest in

new roads and bridges."

That statement could either mean fixing the infrastructure, or expanding urban sprawl that runs on cheap oil and destroys the environment. Later on in the speech he seemed to be talking about repair and maintenance of roads and bridges.

I'm glad that in the big campaign commercial early this week, which I thought was excellent (except for the cleaner-car focus and drill the oil domestically concession), there was nothing about building new roads.

I hope you will brief the Senator, strictly as a Senate-policy issue of course, on this matter of new roads versus repair, sooner rather than later. As always, I'm at your and his service.

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(1) The Hirsch Report, 2005, for the U.S. Dept. of Energy:

netl.doe.gov

Income disparity history: "After Four Decades, Finally, the Beginning of the End", 06 November 2008, by Mark Weisbrot, Truthout:

truthout.org

Alliance for a Paving Moratorium (archive webpage):

culturechange.org/apm_page.htm