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The Right and the Climate

By ROSS DOUTHAT

Climate change legislation has been dying in the Senate for months now, but [Harry Reid's decision](#) to finally admit as much — in the midst of an endless East Coast heat wave, no less — has supporters of cap-and-trade [casting about](#) for somebody to blame. They've blamed the Obama administration, for prioritizing health care reform over an energy bill. They've blamed the American people, for being too concerned with economic issues to grapple with longer-term threats. And they've blamed figures like Lindsey Graham and John McCain, erstwhile supporters of cap-and-trade who have steadily backpedaled away from it.

But most of all, they've blamed conservatives — for pressuring Republican lawmakers to abandon legislation they once supported, and for closing ranks against any attempt to tax and regulate our way to a lower-carbon economy.

Cap-and-trade's backers are correct to point the finger rightward. If their bill is dead, it was the American conservative movement that ultimately killed it. Climate legislation wasn't like health care, with Democrats voting "yes" in lockstep. There was no way to get a bill through without some support from conservative lawmakers. And in the global warming debate, there's a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the conservative movement and the environmentalist cause.

To understand why, it's worth going back to the 1970s, the crucible in which modern right-wing politics was forged.

The Seventies were a great decade for apocalyptic enthusiasms, and none was more potent than the fear that human population growth had outstripped the earth's carrying capacity. According to a chorus of credentialed alarmists, the world was entering an age of sweeping famines, crippling energy shortages, and looming civilizational collapse.

It was not lost on conservatives that this analysis led inexorably to left-wing policy prescriptions — a government-run energy sector at home, and population control for the teeming masses overseas.

Social conservatives and libertarians, the two wings of the American right, found common ground resisting these prescriptions. And time was unkind to the alarmists. The catastrophes never materialized, and global living standards soared. By the turn of the millennium, the developed world was worrying about [a birth dearth](#).

This is the lens through which most conservatives view the global warming debate. Again, a doomsday scenario has generated a crisis atmosphere, which is being invoked to justify taxes and regulations that many left-wingers would support anyway. (Some of the players have even been recycled. John Holdren, Barack Obama's science adviser, was a [friend and ally of Paul Ehrlich](#), whose tract "The Population Bomb" helped kick off the overpopulation panic.)

History, however, rarely repeats itself exactly — and conservatives who treat global warming as just another scare story are almost certainly mistaken.

Rising temperatures won't "destroy" the planet, as fearmongers and celebrities like to say. But the evidence that carbon emissions are altering the planet's ecology is too convincing to ignore. Conservatives who dismiss climate change as a hoax are making a spectacle of their ignorance.

But this doesn't mean that we should mourn the death of cap-and-trade. It's possible that the best thing to do about a warming earth — for now, at least — is relatively little. This is the view advanced by famous global-warming heretics like [Bjorn Lomborg](#) and [Freeman Dyson](#); in recent [online debates](#), it has been championed by Jim Manzi, the American right's most persuasive critic of climate-change legislation.

Their perspective is grounded, in part, on the assumption that a warmer world will also be a richer world — and that economic development is likely to do more for the wretched of the earth than a growth-slowing regulatory regime.

But it's also grounded in skepticism that such a regime is possible. Any attempt to legislate our way to a cooler earth, the argument goes, will inevitably resemble the package of cap-and-trade emission restrictions that passed the House last year: a Rube Goldberg contraption whose buy-offs and giveaways swamped its original purpose.

Liberals disagree, of course. They think the skeptics [underestimate the potential for catastrophe](#), and overestimate the costs of regulation. They, too, look to the past for lessons, but their model is the Clean Air Act and its various modifications, which reduced domestic air pollution relatively cheaply.

But the Clean Air Act didn't require collective action on a global scale — the kind of action that last year's Copenhagen conference placed ever further out of reach. What's more, a crucial technology, the catalytic converter, was already on the way as the act's provisions went into effect.

Cap-and-trade is more of a leap in the dark.

Liberalism specializes in such leaps. But you can see why conservatives might lean toward the wisdom of inaction. Not every danger has a regulatory solution, and sometimes it makes sense to wait, get richer, and then try to muddle through.