

B7-- "RATIFYING KYOTO FOR OUR CHILDREN'S GRANDCHILDREN", SNR, 1998 (WITH ED SMELOFF)

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How do we weigh the wellbeing of billions of our descendants, our own future flesh and blood, against short-term economic disruption that might occur through serious efforts to avert global warming? Should short-term economic fears outweigh the significance of bequeathing a decaying biosphere to our children's grandchildren, whose faces we may never see and whose voices we may never hear, but who will carry our hopes for achieving a meaning that can transcend our deaths?

As the U.S. now begins a national debate on ratifying the global warming agreement reached at Kyoto, such fundamental human and moral questions need to take precedence over the economic issues which so dominate the present discussion. As Jonas Salk noted, the key question of our time is whether we will be remembered as wise or prodigal ancestors who, "at a decisive moment, dissipated an opportunity by not assuming responsibility for the future evolution of the species".

In 1988 the world created the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the most elaborate scientific decision-making body in history, to investigate whether humans were threatening the earth's climate by emitting greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In 1995, more than 95% of the more than two thousand international IPCC scientists concluded that human activities were contributing to global warming, which would likely "have wide-ranging and mostly adverse impacts on human health, with significant loss of life."

Their dire predictions were based on an assumed doubling of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. Their most sobering finding was that greenhouse gas emissions need to be reduced by 50-70% from present levels to stabilize present concentrations, which are already 30% higher than a century ago.

Thus even were we to reduce emissions to 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012, the present U.S. target, we would still be emitting nearly 6 billion tons a year - making a doubling of greenhouse gases inevitable absent a shift to a hydrogen-based economy.

More chillingly, many experts now agree with a former top Administration global warming expert who says that "the real question is whether we can avoid a three times carbon world" - given industry pressures, weak U.S. leadership, Third World demands for economic growth, and falling coal prices.

Perhaps the only way the world can keep from sliding toward the unpredictable and potentially catastrophic consequences that such global warming could produce is if we realize that the stakes are not just jobs or economic growth, but the very future of life as we know it. There is bred into each of us a concern for our descendants - evolution means little if it is not. What is needed now is a new moral politics of global warming that brings this concern for future generations into public policy.

The economics and politics of climate change are, of course, important. But to argue that we should risk destroying our descendants' biosphere because of the possibility of a drop in GNP diminishes our humanity. Dr. Salk was right in suggesting that today's environmental challenges - led by global warming but including averting species destruction, ozone layer depletion, air and water pollution, chemical and nuclear proliferation, endocrine disruption, and many others - go to the heart of the future of life itself.

Humans have for millennia assumed that, on the whole, their descendants would enjoy better lives than they. We are the first generation who cannot make this assumption, because of the threat we pose to the earth's biosphere. This shift has occurred so suddenly that our laws, economics, politics, science, social systems and, above all, psyches have not caught up. It is past time they did.

We need to modify our laws, which now concern only the living, to protect our descendants. Our economics, which assumes that future humans will be rich enough to remedy the damage we cause, needs to be rethought to account for such irreplaceable goods as the

atmosphere and other species. We need to redesign our politics, now geared to daily news cycles and the next election, to protect posterity.

Ratifying the Kyoto agreement will not solve our environmental problems overnight. But if we not only ratify but then implement it, it can be an important step on the way.

Our children's grandchildren, and we, deserve no less.