

HOT AIR IN JOHANNESBURG The Continuing Myth of the 'Population Bomb'

By

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As the hot air rises from the deliberations of the UN's Earth Summit in Johannesburg, many of the Greens present will no doubt be pointing to the recent reports of a brown haze of pollution which has spread over most of Asia and which it is claimed threatens dire climate change. The culprits are the burgeoning masses of the Asian poor who are burning down the rain forests in Indonesia and in India to provide the fuel for the millions of *chulas* which have for millennia provided the basic heat energy for mankind. This only changed when the Industrial Revolution, based on the energy provided by hydrocarbons, unleashed the Unbound Prometheus. It is the developed world which uses hydrocarbon energy for all its energy requirements that no longer needs to collect and burn firewood for cooking and heating. The faster Asia can similarly move to hydrocarbon energy intensive economies the faster the brown haze over Asia will disappear.

But, the Greens are virulently against hydrocarbons which they claim are causing global warming- an issue on which there is considerable and continuing scientific doubt, as shown in an excellent survey of the evidence by a former Green, Bjorn Lomborg in his *The Sceptical Environmentalist*. Paradoxically, as Philip Stott Professor of Biogeography at the University of London points out ("The world's energy-poor need hydrocarbon fuels", Daily Telegraph, 27 August), part of their solution to prevent this purported catastrophe is to use 'biomass fuel' - the very leaves and twigs which are now supposedly causing the brown cloud of pollution over Asia. While they oppose on other 'environmental' grounds other forms of renewable energy, such as hydroelectric power because the associated dams force the resettlement of local people, prevent fish to migrate and various natural species lose their habitat. Windmill farms are opposed because they disturb the wilderness and kill birds. Tidal barrages because they disturb aquatic eco-systems, and geothermal projects because they scar sensitive ecological areas. Nuclear power is of course beyond the pale. While the Green's favoured renewable alternatives like solar energy are "more fantasy than reality, with most photovoltaic solar cells, producing less energy in their life-time than is needed to make them in the first place" (Stott)

So, if the Greens assembled under the UN banner at Johannesburg succeed, the poor of Asia will not only remain energy poor but as the Green lobby has been increasingly successful in imposing fuel-cutting bans in protected forests, will make the traditional sources of fuel gathering ever more difficult. But the clue to the misanthropy of the Greens is provided by their claim that it is the burgeoning population of Asia which has caused the brown haze over Asia. This brown haze is not new and has been around for hundreds of years fed by the fires of the billions who have inhabited the Asian continent over the millennia. Fossil fuels provide not only the answer to the haze but also to alleviating its mass structural poverty as they have in the industrialized

nations. The fear that using hydrocarbons to provide the average standard of living of the industrialized world for the burgeoning masses of Asia will not be 'sustainable'- an increasingly meaningless word- is belied by the fact that as even the Green lobby's chief scientific cheer leader the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change notes that at present the total cumulative world consumption of hydrocarbons is only 1.4 percent of currently estimated available stocks. While new hydrocarbons like Orimulsion are coming on stream. This is a tar-like substance whose estimated reserves "are greater than the global supply of crude oil on an energy equivalent basis" (Stott). There is no physical reason why using cheap hydrocarbon energy to yield the average standards of living in the developed world to the billions of energy starved Asian poor is not feasible. The major threat to their prospects comes from the Greens.

The Green lobby from its inception has played on the atavistic Malthusian fear of continuing immiserisation through excessive breeding in a country with limited land and natural resources. At its crudest this fear is based on the law of diminishing returns from increases in one factor of production when the other (land) is fixed, and the simple arithmetic of calculating per capita income as a ratio of GNP to population. Thus if an infant is born to a cow, per capita income goes up, but if an infant is born to a human per capita income goes down!

But there is also an emotional response, expressed for instance by Paul Erlich who in his famous *The Population Bomb* writes: "I came to understand the population explosion emotionally one stinking hot night in New Delhi...The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping, people visiting, arguing and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people." Many of the Westernised Indians share this emotional response as well as the crude intellectualizing of the 'population problem', so it was hardly surprising that Sanjay Gandhi thought that India's problems of poverty could be solved by coercive sterilization of the poor.

Yet as economic historians (Kuznets) and many eminent economists (including Keynes) have noted, Malthus has been overtaken by the 'demographic transition'. The new 'household economics' pioneered by Nobel prize winning economist Gary Becker, as well as the economic history of the industrial world shows that, a decline in mortality - particularly of infants- due to better sanitation, vaccination and other means of controlling infectious diseases, is followed with a lag by a decline in birth rates, as families -with even an unchanged desired completed family size- adjust their breeding habits to the new mortality regime. Furthermore, if there is some economic progress which raises the opportunity costs of the time spent in rearing children, parents will substitute quality for the quantity of children in their breeding choices.

India is now going through this demographic transition as I will discuss in my next column. The death rate started declining at the start of the 20th century, and fell faster than the birth rate till about 1961-1971. This led to the 'population explosion' which so exercised Erlich and the Indian middle classes. But with the birth rate declining with the infant mortality rate over the century, by 1981 the birth rate was falling faster than the death rate and the rate of population growth started declining from about 1981. So just when all the prophets of doom were wringing their hands over the 'population bomb' and Sanjay Gandhi was undertaking his mass campaign of snipping the vital ducts,

this 'bomb' had already been defused- much as the theory of demographic transition would have predicted.

The demographic transition which has occurred naturally in India (unlike the coercive means adopted in China) shows how foolish is the Green agenda based on its implicit assumption that humans will not adapt to changing circumstances. The only hope for the welfare of the world's and Asia's poor- where much of the world's population is concentrated- is to rapidly convert their economies into hydrocarbon intensive economies. If this- against the current odds- leads to global climate change, human beings have shown over the ages that they will be able to adapt. Meanwhile, what every nation should do is what President Bush has done to the Earth Summit, say "Boo"!