

Roth: Right-wing social engineering?

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Right-wing social engineering?

Not long ago American conservatives professed free-market solutions and an economy without job-killing regulations that pick winners and losers, yet those principles seem to be a thing of the past when it comes to clean energy these days.

To be fair, the American economy does not really meet the actual definition of free market, which according to Dictionary.com is "An economic system in which prices and

wages are determined by unrestricted competition between businesses, without government regulation or fear of monopolies.”

Also, perhaps because much of America’s electricity sector is highly regulated, either as a monopoly or something very close to it, but whatever the reason, 2017 is seeing an unprecedented level of activity attempting to interfere with energy markets.

All across America conservative lawmakers have been introducing a number of bills and legislative efforts to block, tax, halt, hobble and hurt the economics of and markets for clean energy. Here is just a sampling from a few states in 2017:

Wyoming – Nine legislators (two senators and seven representatives, all Republicans, mostly from coal-producing counties) have introduced a new measure that would forbid Wyoming utilities from acquiring any electricity from wind or solar energy projects by 2019, regardless of the fact that those resources are becoming cheaper than traditional fossil fuel. The bill would levy steep fines on utilities if they continue to provide “non-eligible clean energy” for their electric service.

By the way, Wyoming generates and consumes mostly coal-powered electricity, which accounted for roughly 90 percent of its electricity in 2016.

North Dakota – Republican Sen. Dwight Cook introduced a measure (Senate Bill 2314) to impose a moratorium on wind energy development through 2019 and he used a procedural maneuver called a hog-house amendment that erases an existing bill and rewrites it so that the public can’t comment on the proposal because hearings already have been held on the original measure. And even though this tactic may stink to high heaven, a North Dakota Senate committee approved it this

week in a 4-3 vote. North Dakota is a coal state and is home to seven coal plants, where it exports almost 70 percent of its total electricity generation to neighboring states.

Oklahoma – Republican legislators have introduced more than 60 bills about wind energy and the governor's State of the State budget address included a proposed new tax on wind energy, which would be the highest in the nation at \$5 per megawatt-hour of electricity on every customer's utility bill. Granted, Oklahoma has a severe budget dilemma, but this electricity tax idea noticeably does not include any similar tax provisions for out-of-state coal or in-state natural gas, which are still the largest parts of Oklahoma's electricity portfolio.

So what is going on? Why have conservative policymakers seemingly abandoned their core economic free-market philosophies to push regulations designed to put the hurt on clean energy?

It's especially odd when you read the 2016 GOP platform on regulation, which states:

Regulation: The Quiet Tyranny – Over-regulation is the quiet tyranny of the "Nanny State." It hamstringing American businesses and hobbles economic growth.

A possible answer? Coal energy is on the ropes and its sympathizers know that desperate times may call for desperate measures. Nevertheless, no matter how many conservative nannies pop up across the country to push to save coal, the power of economics, like water, will flow to their logical outcome over time.

And for us Oklahomans, that is actually a good thing, because clean-burning, (overly) abundant (and cheap) domestic natural gas is the greatest, single market effect pushing coal to the ash heap on energy history. It will not be immediate, so please do not celebrate or panic, but it is real and it is here to stay. Free-market or not.

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