

Paradigm of the Energy Debate: A Critical Analysis

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Literary Works

Coburn, Timothy & Farhar, Barbara. (Jan/Feb 2008) A New Market Paradigm for Zero-Energy Homes: A Comparative Case Study. *Environment*, 50(1), 18,20-27,29-32. Retrieved July 22, 2008 from Research Library database. (Document ID: 1416553091).

Stein, Steve (2008). Energy Independence Isn't Very Green. *Policy Review*, (148), pp3-18. Retrieved July 23, 2008 from Research Library database. (Document ID: 1468025221).

Paradigm of the Energy Debate: Article Summary

There are conflicting opinions about energy policy and consumption deterrence. The climate change issues and environmental impressions have impacted the views about energy policy as intertwined issues since burning of fossil fuels for energy creates an environmental concern. These two articles generally accept the paradigm of climate change and a need for energy policy changes, but one focuses the discussion upon the paradigms of the grand debate about green energy alternatives and the other looks at the paradigm of local markets for “green property”. This paper will compare and contrast the wide divide of concerns issued in these two works and will attempt to find a common concept within these articles. We will see good and poor examples of Dunn’s (2008) policy analysis techniques.

Paradigms of discussion

Both of these articles point out significant problems with energy policy alternatives as a policy and how they are implemented. Stein argues that legislation for energy policy like the Energy Act of 2007 is “watered down” and that curbing carbon emissions and oil imports has been delayed by even the environmental people like Sierra Club (Stein, 2008) and argues further that international attempts like the UN International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to mandate emission controls has been mired in political nuisance and contradictions. Corburn and Farhar (2008) also argue that the IPCC recommendations call for dramatic changes in emissions control for residential developments. Yet, Stein (2008) points out that the IPCC does not recommend

nuclear energy due to safety concerns despite the significantly low cost of production (MEC, 2008) and low emissions of producing nuclear power.

The United States energy supply is based upon an abundance of coal and coal-burning facilities that make the cost of this energy cheaper than most forms of energy (MEC, 2008; Corburn & Farhar, 2008; Stein, 2008). They discuss how the Million Solar Roofs initiative was only possible when the market conditions enabled the affordability and better efficiency of solar power (Corburn & Farhar, 2008; Stein, 2008). Additionally, the focus of the SheaHomes project in San Diego was to reduce the energy consumption that a conventional home produces by using features like solar power heating (Corburn & Farhar, 2008). Additionally, companies like MidAmerican Energy (MEC) have made a focused effort to increase percentage of the supply via wind-power (MEC, 2008). Yet, some NGOs are arguing against wind power because of the affect upon migratory bird patterns (Stein, 2008) which has stalled the implementation of larger, more expansive wind farm projects.

They agree that the markets sway how and when energy policy alternatives will be considered. Crisis and financial changes deeply affect the changes of policy or focus of those changes. Stein (2008) gives the example of how gasoline consumption levels resumed after price stabilized and further accelerated when manufacturers were able to sell SUVs despite the economic chaos and significant conservation surrounding the 1970s oil crisis. Coburn and Farhar (2008) suggest that high performance homes (HPH) or near zero energy homes (near-ZEH) will only do well when the market supports the sale of these homes. The current cost of development of these homes is higher than conventional homes development and therefore would be sold to more affluent members of society.

They also agree that consumption may generally increase (maybe even accelerate) when the energy dependence changes as price of energy lowers. Essentially, the success of a given energy policy alternative will be highly dependent upon the demand for the alternative as opposed to current developments. As well, significant government support for an alternative or set of alternatives may influence the business development.

They might agree with Kingdon (1984) that certain policy ideas have limits to when or how they can be achieved. Stein is suggesting that too many people in the process have confounded the potential positive aspects of “green” energy policies. Coburn and Farhar have not suggested a time limit but rather limited by the market forces affecting adoption of “green” energy.

Alternatives of methodology and focus

While both articles address paradigms in the energy-environment debate, these articles have stark contrasts of approach and methodology to the issues and discussion. The primary discussion by Coburn and Farhar (2008) focuses upon the technology and factors affecting the SheaHomes Project in San Diego, whereas Stein (2008) discusses a survey of arguments of various elements of the environmental energy debate. Coburn and Farhar use the SheaHomes project to show how implemented policy in San Diego had great promise but the implementation was mired in barely distinguishable technology improvements due to contradicting interests.

Stein discussion worries less about a focused argument, but in essence, he suggests the whole debate is a paradigm of decision and contradictions. With every “green” concept, Stein finds that some interest group (some whom have missions surrounding environmentalism like Greenpeace or Sierra Club) has an interest in stalling certain developments. Thus, the progress of any energy policy alternative stalls against bureaucratic, industrial and interest group desires.

Stein does not critically analyze the alternatives or their factors but instead dismisses the alternatives because of arguments over seemingly trivial details.

Discussion

The challenge of building cohesive energy policy that coordinates efforts of environmental interests is difficult but not impossible. To completely ignore the challenge and to push back on some presumed assumption that maintenance of current policy will yield continued growth unchanged. Anyone desiring to analyze energy policy alternatives would do well to look at Stein's discussion, but the scholar may become more confused by the trading of interests. Furthermore, Stein's view is rather pessimistic towards positive changes with respect to energy upon reading this discussion since the commentary about the paradigms suggests that the whole debate is contradictory in of itself. One can not use Stein's discussion to present a unified decision or evidence about one alternative or another. Yet, a scholar will gain an understanding of the various ways that people and certain interest groups will change position about certain energy policy alternatives (perhaps ironically and satirically). For examples, he discusses how one activist did not enjoy the visual affect of wind farms (almost indirectly suggesting that coal burning factories help produce beautiful skylines) to demonstrate how seemingly trivial issues can halt progress (Stein, 2008).

Coburn and Farhar (2008) work addresses how corruption can harm the best intentions of policy alternatives when the measurable success is difficult to ascertain or the vendors are not transparent with the information, but they were much more positive in the outlook of energy policy alternatives, especially when we focus upon a targeted venture like the SheaHomes Project. They considered the project be a successful venture and make recommendations to go further with the research and findings. Yet, they do not propose sweeping new building codes for

new structures or how to implement to HPH or near-ZEH techniques and technology to existing structures. Wirth & Podesta (2008) agree with Corburn and Farhar's assessment that the energy situation can drive economic development.

They both agree fundamentally that demand will drive the changes needed for good, efficient and economical "green" energy policy. Thus, public policy will have to adjust to encourage demand for the products and services and the focus has to remain upon the end concept before getting mired in bureaucratic or special interest detail.

These papers give a diverse approach to policy analysis: one from a macro-level and the other from a project level. Each considers the stakeholders and how the policy was structured and evaluated. Corburn and Farhar's assessment is a better examination of a policy due to the meticulousness of argument.

Conclusion

While a scholar could be hopeful to get a good perspective of the energy debate from Stein, the work could not present a practical case or analysis techniques referenced by Dunn (2008) for any direction of energy alternatives besides the current consumption trends which leaves us vulnerable to the same security issues that Stein, himself, addresses (Stein, 2008; Wirth & Podesta, 2008). When one reviews the Corburn and Farhar work, we have a diametrically better analysis and precise evaluation of a project implementation that could provide great benefit to future research as well as to homeowners and to the community at large if a similar project were implemented properly. The two papers however are not atypical since the debate over climate change ranges from a Congressman from Oklahoma claiming that global warming is a hoax whereas Al Gore is claiming a climate crisis is at hand. Such polar positions generate plenty of debate to consider.

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