

COLLAPSED SINGLE PAYER ATTEMPTS

In Vermont, anticipated tax burdens undercut the single payer plan of Vermont's progressive politicians.

Colorado's \$25 billion single payer plan, a proposed doubling of the state's budget, was supposed to reap big savings. In fact, the Colorado Health Institute found that, even with federal Medicaid matching funds, the proposed program would have run a \$253 million deficit in its first year of operation.¹ More than three out of four Colorado voters refused to back the proposal containing a 10% payroll tax.

In California, as Rep. Gottfried rightly observes, sponsors of the aborted "The Healthy California Act" didn't specify their funding. It wouldn't have changed much if they did. The California legislative analysts estimated the bill's cost at \$400 billion annually, more than twice the size of the entire state

budget. They estimated further that the sponsors would have to raise \$200 billion in revenue, most likely through a 15% payroll tax.² If such a tax were enacted—on top of the 15.3% federal payroll tax—California residents would have been severely punished. Like New Yorkers, Californians already have one of the highest marginal tax rates in the country.

In these three cases, collapse was not attributable to badly designed tax rates, inferior public relations, or insufficient campaign spending. Citizens in those three states would have faced unprecedented taxes, and the true costs would likely have outrun projected revenues.

LOSS OF PERSONAL FREEDOM

Another drawback of single payer is that citizens who like

their private health plans, including their employer coverage, would not be able to keep them. It would be illegal for insurers to offer competitive benefit packages, and doctors and other medical professionals would, as Gottfried says, be barred "from seeking or accepting any additional payment for any New York health service." In short, people would not be able to enter into a private contract with a doctor and spend their own money for a "covered" medical service.

STATE EXPERIMENTS

Despite decades of power centralization in Washington, the Constitution gives states the power to experiment with public policy. If "blue" states like New York wish to enact a single payer system, they are free to do so. If Congress liberalizes current law, "red" states should

also be able to experiment in health policy. One caveat should apply to both: federal taxpayers should not be forced to bail out failure. **AJPH**

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The EPA: Time to Re-Invent Environmental Protection



See also Morabia, p. 426; Sundwall, p. 449; Woolhandler and Himmelstein, p. 451; Gottfried, p. 452; Moffit, p. 453; Zimmer, p. 456; Bassett and Graves, p. 457; and Kirkham, p. 458.

One way to imagine a world without the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is to draw on our memory of what the environment was like before the agency was created in 1970. This can be approached from two perspectives: from the viewpoint of the physical environment and from the viewpoint of the social and political environment. The conduct of these practical exercises is timely in that the authority and survival of the EPA are now seriously threatened. The president and congressional Republicans have proposed

funding and workforce reductions that will devastate the agency with respect to its capacity to protect human health and the environment. To prevent this catastrophe, it is instructive to explore the reasons why the EPA has lost public and political support.

The EPA was created in 1970, with strong bipartisan support, by a Republican president who was not particularly interested in environmental health issues. In creating the EPA, President Richard Nixon and Congress were responding to public

outrage about the deplorable conditions of the environment. Public pressure for action was so intense that lawmakers could no longer ignore the problem. One did not need experts or highly sensitive technologies to convince the American people that the environment was highly polluted. Rivers were "catching on fire," acute deaths from air pollution were commonplace in

some US cities, hazardous waste sites were proliferating, and the air quality was so bad in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, that street lights were turned on during the daytime to protect pedestrians crossing the streets and to prevent automobiles from colliding because of poor visibility.¹ These awful conditions led to an explosion of highly vocal public support for environmental protection.

The EPA made such spectacular progress in cleaning up the environment over the first 30 years of the agency's existence that our memory of what it was like in the 1950s and 1960s has

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This editorial was accepted December 19, 2017.

doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2017.304303

been virtually wiped out. The “big dirties” have disappeared from the landscape. In spite of the fact that approximately 75% of Americans expressed support for environmental protection in a 2016 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center,² the public does not view the conditions of the environment as grossly offensive. Americans behave as if they believe that developing and enforcing environmental regulations, although still important, is no longer a national priority—that the mission of the EPA has been accomplished. Otherwise, why would we tolerate the massive roll back in the agency’s policies, budget, and staff proposed by EPA administrator Scott Pruitt and the Republican-controlled Congress?

REINVENTING THE FIELD

Given the record of success just described and the impact the agency has had on public perception, it was necessary for the EPA and the community advocating for environmental protection to “re-invent” the field. Unfortunately, however, this never happened. Government agencies, like businesses, must continue to reinvent themselves and develop new strategies in response to competition and changes in the market; otherwise, they will become irrelevant. It was critical for the EPA to make the case that environmental protection is an activity that never goes away and that there are hazards in the environment even though one may not be able to see, taste, or smell them. In the absence of visible pollutants, the EPA needed to have put a human face on environmental protection by linking invisible pollutants to human health.

Consider the National Institutes of Health; the agency has grown from its humble beginnings as a hygiene laboratory with a focus on infectious diseases to become a federation of 27 institutes and centers with specific research agendas and a combined budget in excess of \$33 billion.³ Although infectious disease research has remained an important part of the agency, it has reinvented itself in light of its success in eradicating the epidemic of infectious diseases, which resulted in an increase in life expectancy of approximately 30 years.⁴ Unlike the EPA, the National Institutes of Health did not become a victim of its own success but instead identified the new scientific challenges associated with the rise in life expectancy (e.g., increases in chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease) and redirected its research efforts.

Similarly, the EPA needs a communication strategy to convince the American people that the agency is just as important today as it was in the 1970s, along with a more proactive and inclusive management strategy that goes beyond enforcement of legal statutes by embracing economics and the social and behavioral sciences. The EPA needs to play a leadership role in promoting dialogue to facilitate a socially responsible transition away from dependency on coal and oil as a source of energy and manual labor in manufacturing. Otherwise, farmers, coal miners, and blue-collar workers will view environmental protection as a threat to their economic survival. It is difficult to convey passion and convince people that one cares about and understands their problems through press releases and fact sheets.

William Ruckelshaus, generally acknowledged to be one of the most successful EPA

administrators, obviously understood this challenge and traveled around the nation to talk with state regulators and convene meetings in various regions. He also insisted that the agency conduct its business in a “fishbowl.”

VICTIM OF ITS OWN SUCCESS

The EPA must become more adept in responding to the social, scientific, and political changes occurring in the nation; otherwise, its role in government will continue to be diminished. The tension between jobs, economic growth, and pollution is not new; it has always been an issue associated with environmental protection. Even before the EPA was created, local residents would resist state regulatory efforts if jobs were threatened, and politicians and local governments were always concerned that industries would relocate to states that had the least burdensome environmental regulations (the so-called “race-to-the-bottom” effect).⁵ In the global economy, industries are no longer restricted to the continental United States in their search for cheap labor and weak occupational health and safety and environmental protection policies and practices.

Ruckelshaus has expressed the view that the EPA is a victim of its own success.⁶ Christine Whitman, another former EPA administrator, has opined that when the consequences of climate change, such as flooding from sea level rises and droughts, become more severe, public support for environmental protection will be renewed.⁶ My view is that the EPA’s current problems are related to its earlier success in cleaning up the environment, coupled with its failure to reinvent itself in the context of the

dramatic reduction in visible pollution and economic and social changes that have occurred in the United States since 1970.

FUTURE ROLE OF THE EPA

In summary, it is clear that the nation has reached a point at which decisions about the way forward in environmental protection need to be made. It was inevitable that the technology-driven, command-control approaches that were so effective in the remediation and prevention of regional or point-source pollution associated with human activity would need to be recalibrated to accommodate the shift from point- to scattered-source pollution (e.g., farm runoff and carbon emissions from use of fossil fuels) and changes in attitudes toward pollution on the part of the public, businesses, and local governments.

Although there are exceptions, the prevailing attitude is that environmental protection is good for both local governments and businesses with respect to recruitment of industries with high-paying jobs and profits, respectively. Because scattered pollution is more prone to drift across state boundaries, prevention will require more collaborative approaches involving the federal government and multiple states. Thus, the future roles of the EPA are to work with states in developing clear national goals, to develop and disseminate tools to allow monitoring of progress, to garner financial resources to assist less prosperous states in implementing prevention policies, and to grant more flexibility to state and local governments in achieving their goals.

The challenges that dominated the remediation and pollution control efforts of the EPA for its first 30 years have little resemblance to the challenges of the 21st century.

Therefore, the EPA needs an inspirational, visionary leader who can bring warring factions together to achieve a common goal. **AJPH**

Kenneth Olden, PhD

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Zimmer Responds

 See also Morabia, p. 426; Sundwall, p. 449; Woolhandler and Himmelstein, p. 451; Gottfried, p. 452; Moffit, p. 453; Olden, p. 454; Bassett and Graves, p. 457; and Kirkham, p. 458.

I agree with Olden’s view in this issue of AJPH (p. 454) that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) faces unprecedented challenges, but I disagree on the reasons why it faces them.

NOT VICTIM OF BUDGET CUTS

Unlike Olden, I do not believe the EPA will fall victim to budget cuts. In fact, the Appropriations Committees of both houses of Congress have rejected nearly all the cuts in the budget President Trump proposed. Under proper leadership, the EPA can appropriately meet its regulatory obligations with relatively flat funding.

On the basis of my experience in Congress, businesses generally can live with fairly high levels of spending by regulatory agencies. They dislike new regulations that impose significant costs (especially if their effective date comes too quickly for them to smoothly adjust), but they value prompt responses from regulators, which they understand take reasonable numbers of experienced and decently paid staff. For example, large pharmaceutical companies

value a responsive and professional Food and Drug Administration, and federal contractors need a reliable federal acquisition process. All this takes a lot of federal money.

Moreover, there is a great deal of inertia in federal spending programs (and a lot of lobbying to keep them going). As they gain more seniority, appropriators tend to identify with the mission of the agencies they fund because they usually choose subcommittees that are economically important to their district. Over time, they develop personal ties to the bureaucrats they oversee and the lobbyists supporting the programs for which they provide money.

Moreover, American businesses have come to accept most environmental regulations and have built their enterprises on the belief that a commitment to a healthy environment is good for business. For instance, despite political polarization, most large businesses—with the exception of those directly reliant on the extraction of carbon-based fuels—continue to support the Paris Accords.

VICTIM OF ITS DIRECTOR . . .

The problem facing the EPA does not come from lack of funding or a recalcitrant business community. It instead comes from its director, Scott Pruitt, who was nominated by President Trump because of his record of fervent opposition to federal environmental regulations as Oklahoma Attorney General.

Here are some of the actions Pruitt has taken in his first year:

- He has moved quickly to delay or undo many environmental rules, including the Obama Administration’s Clean Power Plan.
- He has replaced academics with industry representatives on EPA advisory councils.¹
- He has alienated and demoralized many staff employees, leading to more than 700 departures, including the loss of more than 200 scientists.²
- He has drastically reduced civil penalties against polluters compared with previous administrations.³

Pruitt is not the “inspirational, visionary leader” Olden says is needed to reinvent the EPA. He is instead the most retrograde EPA administrator since Anne Gorsuch.

. . . AND OF ITS SUCCESS

I agree with Olden’s assessment that the EPA is the victim of its success in reducing pollution levels. Political observers have noted that this success has been minimized by opponents of environmental regulation, who do not want to concede that it has produced benefits commensurate with its costs, and also by environmental organizations, whose political and financial interests are served by a perception that the environment is in decline.

Finally, I believe that Olden is correct in his view that the EPA’s original command-and-control regulations are outdated and should be recalibrated to better regulate nonpoint source pollution and new global economic realities. Regrettably, Scott Pruitt is not the man for this job. **AJPH**

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This editorial was accepted January 17, 2018. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2018.304332