

The Social Contract

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A Note from the Editor

The End Is Here...Or Very Near

The end of cheap energy, that is. In this issue, Richard Duncan, Lindsey Grant, John Tanton, Peter Salonius, and Richard Pelto consider how the looming scarcity of non-renewable fossil fuels is likely to impact our societies in the near and long term. Experts can differ, but there can be little question but that we are starting to experience some of the consequences of growing populations facing declining access to relatively inexpensive sources of energy.

The Northeastern United States is facing a winter-heating crisis as international crude-oil prices hover at \$100 a barrel. Sen. Olympia Snow (R-Maine) says the situation “has elevated from an extreme burden to an extreme crisis.” Rising costs of biofuels and other alternative energies are making them less viable as substitutes for crude oil. A sharp rise in raw-materials costs makes a number of proposed alternatives less attractive. For example, the price of palm-oil has risen over 90 percent over the past three years. This has dramatically altered the economics of palm-oil-based biodiesel, touted as one of the growable replacements for crude oil. Now, crude oil would have to sell for over \$130 a barrel before palm-oil-based biodiesel starts to become competitive.

U.S. electricity demand is growing at twice the pace that new supplies are being added. In its latest 10-year forecast, the North American Electric Reliability Council finds that the imbalance could lead to serious supply problems within two years. Over the next decade, peak demand is expected to increase 18 percent, while reliable sources of power are expected to increase only 8.4 percent.

As Garrett Hardin noted years ago, decrying “shortages” of resources is just another way of trying to talk around the consequences of population “longages.” In the case of the United States, had we balanced our population at a sustainable level in the late 1960s, we would not be facing the energy “shortages” we have today and can expect tomorrow. Who now recalls that back in 1974, during the administration of President Gerald Ford, National Security Study Memorandum 200 concluded that overpopulation can lead to political instability and violence? It looks as if we are heading into the sort of “interesting times” anticipated by the ancient Chinese curse. We will see if we are equal to the challenge. ■

Wayne Lutton, PhD