

For Sale: The Policies of the Sierra Club

BY RICHARD D. LAMM

I was President of Zero Population Growth (ZPG) in the 1960s, when our Executive Director hired an ambitious young activist named Carl Pope. Yes, the same Carl Pope who has led the Sierra Club to renounce its earlier stand on stabilizing the population of the U.S. The issues haven't changed, but Carl has, but I get ahead of my story. Carl was smart and ambitious and would wax eloquent about overpopulation at home and abroad. He was a good staff member, worked hard, and was very dedicated. We fought many battles together for reproductive freedom and population awareness, with a particular emphasis on what the United States could and should do to avoid the burdens of overpopulation.

What a difference 40 years can make! Now the same Carl Pope as Executive Director of the Sierra Club is fighting tooth and nail to keep the Sierra Club from addressing overpopulation in the U.S. Essentially, he is saying that America's immigration policy must await the world solving the problem of overpopulation.

Clearly overpopulation is a worldwide problem, but it doesn't follow from this reality that it ceases to be a national issue for the United States also. The last 30 years have shown that other nations act decisively in advancing their demographic interests. India and China have both had aggressive public policy seeking to slow their rates of population growth. Europe and most recently Russia have been passing a variety of incentives to increase their birth rates. "Demography is destiny" goes the aphorism, and most other nations recognize, explicitly or implicitly, that they need a population policy.

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The United States has no population policy, no stated demographic goals, but it does have immigration laws that the Census Bureau says will double U.S. population, and then double it again by the end of this century. Current immigration policy, which many are trying to further liberalize, will leave our grandkids an America of *1 billion* Americans. Most Americans rebel at a billion neighbors, but few are aware that in the current era of mass immigration, we are now taking four times as many immigrants as we have averaged over the last 200 years. We are moving into a whole new demographic future, guided not by critical thinking and analysis, but by the nostalgia of our past immigrant success.

Overpopulation's National Problem

It is hard to write a happy scenario for the environment with a billion Americans. No matter, argues the Sierra Club, overpopulation is only a "global problem." Implicitly their stand says we have no separate independent national interest in the size of America's population. They will remain mute on U.S. legal and illegal immigration and only consider the population question as a global concern.

Is immigration to the U.S. an answer or part of the answer to world overpopulation? Could the Sierra Club have a point? I suggest not. Not when you recognize that the world adds 75 million new people every year and that America's maximum generosity in immigration could hardly dent the ravages of overpopulation abroad. As John Tanton says so well, "Most of the world's people will have to bloom where they are planted." We can succeed in overpopulating America by ignoring the issue; we cannot succeed in solving or even alleviating overpopulation abroad.

Do we have no national interest, as citizens of the U.S. to protect? Are we merely global citizens with no defensible national interests? Can't we

protect our borders until everyone in a chaotic world achieves stability? Is there no defined “overpopulation” category applying to the U.S.?

Charlie Brown in Peanuts says “There is no issue too big that you can’t run away from it.” But the Sierra Club needs a strategy more subtle than that. So globalize it! Blow up the problem to global proportions whereby the scope and scale are so paralyzing that you can justify (at least to yourself) doing nothing. It’s a variation of the old joke where an abashed husband says that he is the boss of “all the large problems, i.e. what we do about nuclear disarmament, the Middle East and our China policy,” whereby his wife is in charge of the “second tier problems like where they live, how they spend their money, how their children are raised.” Globalizing problems too often is merely an excuse for inaction.

One of the important, liberating insights of the environmental movement has been “Think Globally, Act Locally.” The wisdom of that phrase is liberating and empowering; there are a number of global problems (pollution, global warming, desertification) that do demand global attention, but that doesn’t excuse you also from acting at your own level. You should not be paralyzed by the magnitude of the problem; you should “act locally.” The strategy of “acting locally” allows us to break down a big problem to manageable size. We can all bring to complicated problems our own skills and energy. The challenge of public policy is to do what you can where you can at the level of government available to you.

Yes, environmental problems are interconnected and interrelated. They usually transcend jurisdictional lines, but that doesn’t mean that every jurisdiction doesn’t have some duty to act. “Acting locally” helps emphasize that we all own a part of the problem and that we all can do something about it.

The fact that a problem has global dimensions

in no way precludes a nation from having its own independent jurisdiction and duty to act. International cooperation is an add-on, not an alternative.

Each level of government has something to contribute. Someone called this concept “picket-fence” federalism; every problem has a nexus to each level of government. The fact that we have an F.B.I. doesn’t preclude a local police department. Pollution control needs international agreements, federal legislation on auto emissions, and local control of local sources. You do *what* you can *where* you can. To say it is a global problem as an excuse for inaction is an abdication of responsibility. It is a cop-out.

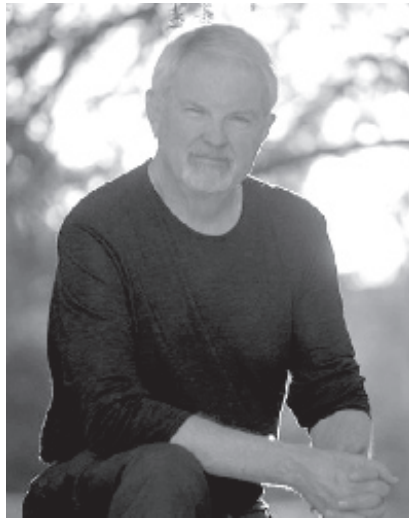
But we know now that the Sierra Club was guilty of worse than a mere evasion. The press discovered in 2004 that David

Gelbaum, a math wizard who made millions on Wall Street, had contributed \$101 million to the Sierra Club. Gelbaum insisted he did not influence the election but admitted that he had earlier warned the club “if they ever came out anti-immigration, they would never get a dollar from me.”

Thus, the Sierra Club has been caught red-handed. A major contributor—no a gargantuan contributor—threatened to withhold his “donation” if his wishes were not followed. The real story it turns out is that the Sierra Club’s policy positions are for sale. Like the women who take “tips” from their “overnight guests” the Sierra Club is “shocked, shocked” at the suggestion that its principles are negotiable for a price.

But that’s the reality. The Sierra Club changed its position for two of the oldest and least justified reasons in history, political expediency, and money. The tragedy is that in doing so, they sold out one of the most important environmental issues of our time.

History will someday make its own judgment, and I suspect that it will not be kind to this betrayal of principle. ■



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