

Waking up to climate change

I received an email from *someone* who said I had a “woke agenda.” Coincidentally, a colleague sent me an article written by Jude Clemente, titled “Five Things I Truly Don’t Understand About the Inevitable Energy Transition” (Jude Clemente is a principal at JTC Energy Research Associates and also a contributor to *Forbes* magazine, where this article appeared). My friend referred to the transition, saying, “So we are instead hell-bent on a ‘woke agenda’ to frame energy supply and use with almost zero impact on climate change.”

Two references to “woke” is too much to resist, so I decided to investigate what “woke” really means. I always thought it had something to do with sleep!

Wikipedia says, “Woke is an adjective derived from African-American vernacular English (AAVE) meaning alert racial prejudice and discrimination... It has also been used as shorthand for some ideas of the American Left involving identity politics and social justice such as white privilege and slavery reparation.”

What does woke mean in reference to politics? “A person/business/organization who believes they are progressive in their thinking and ideas but are actually backwards and bigoted or racist, depending on the topic.”

Sorry about all of this. But the unsigned e-mail that said I had a “woke agenda” really fired me up. I am sure most of you have heard the term woke, but have you ever been told you have a woke agenda? I assumed the accusation was critical, but unless you understand the terms, who knows, maybe the person was being complimentary. After reading the above, and more, I think my critic was saying my writing and philosophies are shallow and superficial. Honestly, I don’t think my messages are either, but to each their own.

My philosophies and opinions have evolved over years of traveling the world and reading countless messages about what non-recyclables in packaging do to the environment. I have spent time with the less fortunate. I have seen abject poverty in India and the Philippines, and other countries. I have seen the erosion of what we have been given, this earth, this beautiful, incredible world. As I have grown older, I have definitely become more liberal in my thinking. I think that goes with exposure, don’t you? I believe in small business. I believe if you stay static, you will fade away. I believe that change is inevitable. Above all, I believe we have a responsibility to guard and treasure the beauty of this earth and its resources. And, it goes without saying, that I have always and will continue to advocate balance and harmony of nature. If my unnamed critic thinks that’s part of a woke agenda, so be it.

I really wanted this column to be not so much a refutation of the Clemente article, as I find his points very inciteful. However, in reflection, I think Clemente misses all the good that is occurring with not just renewables, but in so many other areas of our society, including packaging.

Clemente says, “In the holy climate panacea triad of more wind, solar, and electric cars, I’m so utterly confused.” He then outlines five points he doesn’t understand about the energy transition:

1) “In a world that is apparently getting both warmer and colder because of global warming, how is it that we can increasingly rely on non-dispatchable (i.e., intermittent, usually unavailable), weather-dependent electricity from wind and solar plants to displace, not just supplement, dispatchable (i.e., baseload, almost always available) coal, gas, and nuclear power?”

He continues by making the point that global warming will cause more and more impactable weather patterns, which creates inconsistent wind and sun, therefore, wind and solar are not alternative but supplemental.

2) “Climate change is a global issue, so how is it that we can claim climate benefits for unilateral climate policy? For example, US gasoline cars constitute just 3% of global CO2 emissions, so how will getting rid of them impact climate change?”

He continues by wondering if climate change is global, why did China add two coal fired plants a week in 2022 while telling the world “don’t worry, we’ll be net-zero, net-zero, mind you, by 2060?” He blasts California for believing the changes it is trying to make are really relevant to changing global climate conditions.

And, his item 3 is truly interesting!

3) “Back to electric vehicles. Even green-tinted but surely practical *Bloomberg* admits that more than 85% of Americans can’t afford an electric car, since they are well more than double the price of oil-based cars. How can a product bring racial justice for Black Americans when the vast majority of them can’t afford it?”

I think he should have used the term minorities, rather than Black Americans, but that’s another argument. Clemente points out that gas is cheaper than electricity, and the costs of raw material for batteries are rising exponentially, and there are enormous issues with the environmental impact of mining.

4) “How on Earth could anybody expect those in Africa and the other horrifically poor nations to ‘get off fossil fuels’ when the rich countries haven’t come close to doing it? Germany and California, the world’s two greenest governments, are still overwhelming fossil fuel-based and overwhelmingly dependent on imports (dangerously so in Germany’s case).”

And finally, his fifth point about being “utterly confused” about the push on renewable energy and electric cars:

5) “But perhaps I’m most confused about the whole air quality thing. The obsession over it gets attached to all energy policies. But there’s clearly a strawman to the ‘we need cleaner air now’.”

He continues by pointing out that our air quality has improved, and life expectancy has increased dramatically. “So, what gives?”

As mentioned, Clemente’s article is well written, and his arguments are clear and forceful. However, when I look at renewable energy, I look at it as “a part” of the solution for global warming. We humans created foul air. In fact, we have created most of the climate change issues that are causing violent weather conditions, which, by the way, seem to be more and more common. The arguments that Clemente uses disregard the mess that we’ve created in the first place. EVs, wind turbines and solar panels are part of the solution, not the whole solution.

In the Western Hemisphere, our society is focused on improvement. We are cleaning up toxic coal ash dumps, for example. Sadly, it seems to take time, energy and money to accomplish change. Political and business interests get in the way, to be sure, but environmental improvement is occurring. ESG (Environmental, Social, & Governance) policies are changing and improving corporate culture. EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) legislation will produce solutions for non-recyclable by-product.

You can say what you want about “green hydrogen,” but the technology can potentially reduce our dependence on fossils. Coke is now experimenting with paper bottles, an effort to not only reduce glass but improve freight efficiencies and reduce its carbon footprint. Mars, the candy bar company, not the planet, has launched an innovative paper wrapper. Not to be outdone by Coke, Absolut Vodka is running a pilot project in the UK using a single-mold paper bottle.

All of these potential changes are pieces of solving the climate change puzzle. I guess if this sounds like a woke agenda, it’s no longer a criticism but a compliment.

Another Letter from the Earth **LNW**



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