



Dismissing the Green New Deal as overreaching 'socialism' ignores reality of climate crisis

BY ALICE KASWAN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 02/28/19 04:00 PM EST

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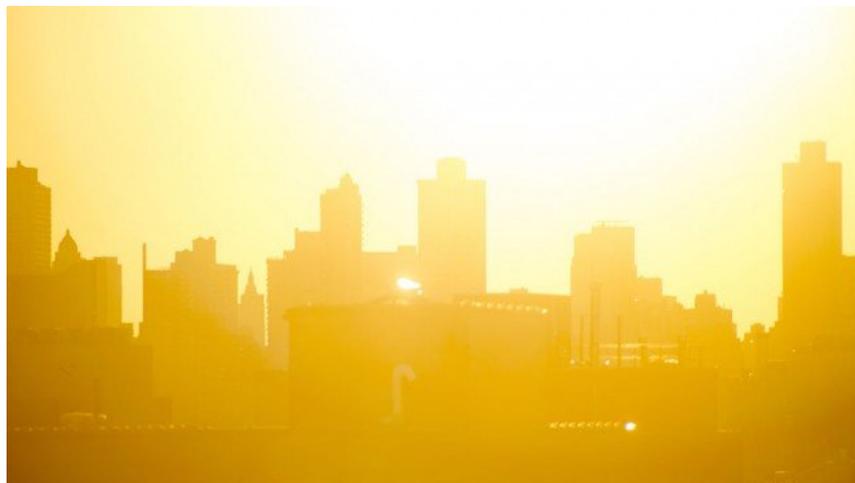
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Critics of the Green New Deal have attempted to smear its ideals, goals, and policies as dangerous “socialism,” displaying a deep skepticism of the government’s capacity to do good. But if ever a time called for dramatic democratic action, for thoughtful deliberation and policy development by our elected officials and our expert agencies, now is that time.

Climate change is not just another environmental problem. Emerging impacts — floods, droughts, heat — provide only a taste of the anticipated devastation and its human and environmental costs. The time for slow and incremental responses is long gone. Transitioning away from unsustainable fossil fuels to a clean green economy is an urgent imperative. What is required is not just piecemeal environmental regulation, nicely tucked into its silo, but widespread shifts in energy sources, infrastructure, transportation, resource development, municipal design and more.

That shift is not going to happen on its own. Although renewables are increasing and carbon-intensive coal plants are closing, the free market is not, and cannot, do enough. Shifting away from fossil fuels will require substantial deliberation about the most sustainable paths forward, significant shifts in utility and energy regulation as we move away from centralized fossil-fueled power plants, major investments in new infrastructure such as new transmission grids and charging infrastructure,

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and more sustainable urban development. Our governing institutions have a pivotal role to play in planning and financing a clean energy transition.

As we all know, these shifts will have ripple effects throughout the economy. Coal miners and other fossil fuel workers, and the communities in which they live, will confront existential challenges. Electricity, heating and transportation costs could increase. Communities adversely impacted by a clean energy transition need a way forward.

At the same time, new opportunities will emerge, including energy efficiency, renewables and increasing employment in green industries. Persistent air and water pollution could decrease, improving public health and environmental conditions. Vulnerable communities left out of past prosperity could find new opportunities to participate in a clean economy.

Wise government policy must attend to the socioeconomic implications of a transition, addressing its risks and optimizing its benefits. That's what the Green New Deal is about.

Recognizing the enormous human, environmental and economic costs of unhindered climate change, the congressional resolution to create a Green New Deal throws down the gauntlet for dramatic action, establishing a "10-year national mobilization" to push for swift action. While 10 years is a short timeline for dramatic change, the proposal forces attention on current decisions and avoids the all-too-human instinct for procrastination and avoidance in response to far-off and difficult deadlines.

The Green New Deal resolution recognizes the multi-faceted nature of the governmental response we need. It includes "building resiliency against climate-related disasters," and "repairing and upgrading infrastructure" in ways that reduce pollution and greenhouse gases. As has been well-publicized, the mobilization plan aims for 100 percent zero-emission energy, energy efficiency, a "massive growth in clean manufacturing," "working collaboratively with farmers and ranchers" to reduce emissions and increase food sustainability, and investing in electric vehicles and public transit.

The Green New Deal does not stop with greenhouse gas policy proposals, however. Recognizing the socioeconomic implications of its proposed mobilization, the resolution states that its goal of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions should occur "through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers," "create millions of good high-wage jobs," and secure a clean and sustainable environment and access to healthy food and to nature. Acknowledging the past oppression of indigenous peoples, communities of color, depopulated rural communities, and other vulnerable populations, the resolution seeks to "promote justice and equity" for "frontline and vulnerable communities."

To be sure, the resolution contains some ambitious additional goals, like guaranteeing family-sustaining jobs as well as health care, housing, economic security and a clean and accessible environment. Reasonable people may disagree about how far the government's duty should go. But dismissing the Green New Deal as overreaching "socialism" ignores the reality that, if we are to face the climate crisis, government has a critical role to play in addressing both the environmental and socioeconomic parameters of a transition to a cleaner, more sustainable and more equitable future.

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