

GLOBAL WARNING

A Dim Light on Global Warming

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COPENHAGEN – Amid a growing wave of concern about climate change, many countries – including Brazil, Australia, the United States, and the members of the European Union – passed laws in the 2000's outlawing or severely restricting access to incandescent light bulbs. The intention was understandable: if everyone in the world exchanged most light bulbs for energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs), we could save 3.5% of all electricity, or 1% of our CO2 emissions.



The current attempt by Republicans in the US Congress to roll back America's effort to ban incandescent bulbs has revived this discussion. Many contend that the agenda is being driven by knuckle-dragging climate-change deniers. But it's worth taking a closer look at the premise that banning things is the smartest way to tackle global warming.

Let's be clear: we *do* need to tackle climate change. But this does not mean that we should just cut all emissions. Burning fossil fuels also has significant benefits, and we should weigh those benefits against the costs.

A tax on carbon should be equivalent to its damage. The best estimate of this is about \$7/ton of CO2 or \$0.06/gallon of gasoline (€0.015/liter). Most developed countries already have a tax of this size (and often much larger) on electricity and fossil fuels, although this also incorporates the costs of air pollution and supply insecurity.

While CFLs are more expensive to buy, they are much cheaper over their lifespan, because they use much less energy (even more so with the cost of CO2 factored into taxes on electricity). Thus, on a straightforward cost-benefit basis, it seems to make sense for most people to switch from incandescent bulbs to the new, greener technology.

This is what is great about technological solutions to climate change: if an alternative option is cheaper, people will start using it. My household uses CFLs, and I enjoy knowing that I am causing fewer CO2 emissions and spending less money.

Why, then, is it even necessary to outlaw the old bulbs? The reason is that monetary cost is only one factor. Many people find it annoying that CFLs take time to "warm up." Or they believe that their light is "funny." Or they worry that the bulbs can spread poisonous mercury if they break. For some people, energy-efficient bulbs can trigger epileptic seizures and migraines.

The up-front cost is a factor, too, especially for those on low budgets. And in places where lights are not used very often, a lower-price incandescent bulb can cost less overall than the energy-efficient alternative.

You might imagine that people could choose the right light bulbs for themselves. But proponents of phasing out access to incandescent bulbs argue that they know better. As US Energy Secretary Steven Chu put it recently, "We are taking away a choice that continues to let people waste their own money."

Setting aside other possible objections to this view, there is the problem that it presumes that *all* incandescent bulbs are worth less than \$7/ton of CO2. This is clearly not true for those who suffer from migraines or epileptic seizures because of the new bulbs, or for those who are seriously worried about mercury, or for those who have other reasons for preferring incandescent bulbs.

The solution should be to focus on improving the technology – making the lights safer, brighter, warm up faster, and save more energy, so that more people will replace more of their lights.

But it is not just light bulbs that policymakers have tried to ban. EU parliamentarians voted overwhelmingly to outlaw patio heaters, which one MEP declared to be "a luxury the planet cannot afford."

Who decides when something is luxurious? And where does this end? Should we outlaw air conditioning or television satellite boxes because some people find them luxurious? Should we ban private cars wherever public transport is available to move us from A to B with fewer CO2 emissions?

It makes sense to reflect the cost of CO2 (among many other factors) in the price paid to drive our cars or heat our patios; but when the phase-out proceeds more slowly than some lawmakers wish, a ban is not the right solution.

Real reductions in carbon emissions will occur only when better technology makes it worthwhile for individuals and businesses to change their behavior. CFLs and other advances can take us part of the way, but there are massive technological hurdles to overcome before fossil fuels generally become less attractive than greener alternatives.

This is where a lot of policymakers get it wrong. Governments talk far too much about setting a relatively high carbon tax on emissions, while focusing far too little on ensuring a meaningful increase in research and development to bring about necessary breakthroughs.

Limiting access to the 'wrong' light bulbs or patio heaters, ultimately, is not the right path. We will only solve global warming by ensuring that alternative technologies are better than our current options. Then, people the world over will choose to use them.

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