

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Confused and Lethal Priorities of the 21st Century

Life is about choices, both individual choices and institutional choices. Government is the most significant institution in most of our lives. It sets policy and then organizes resources, usually through taxation, to fund those policy choices. Throughout much of the world, governmental institutions and their political leaders believe that climate change is the result of human choices. Therefore, we must alter those individual choices so that climate warming will slow. Those governmental policy choices to effect individual, personal change will necessitate an enormous transfer of wealth and national treasure. For example, the result of the run-up to 2015 UN Climate Change Conference (to be held 30 November to 11 December) has been quite astonishing. The World Bank has pledged a 1/3rd increase in the Bank's direct climate-related financing. China's president Xi Jinping has pledged to match President Obama's \$3 billion pledge to the UN Green Climate Fund. The UK has pledged \$8.9 billion over the next five years for its overseas aid budget to climate-related aid. France has pledged \$5.6 billion annually by 2020. The African Development Bank has pledged to triple its climate-related investments to more than \$5 billion by 2020. Bjorn Lomborg, Director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, offers significant insight into the consequences of the priority of climate-related governmental programs: "This is deeply troubling because aid is being diverted to climate-related matters at the expense of improved public health, education and economic development. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has analyzed about 70% of total global development aid and found that about one in four of those dollars goes to climate-related aid." Is this a confusion of priorities?

1. Consider: Malnourishment claims 1.4 million children's lives each year; 1.2 billion people live in extreme poverty; and 2.6 billion lack clean drinking water. When our world is diverting needed development funds that could solve or lessen some of these human tragedies toward climate-related aid to the same countries, is this immoral?
2. Recently, the UN did an online survey of more than 8 million people from different parts of the world. Respondents from the world's poorest nations to the question, "What matters most to you?," ranked "action taken on climate change" as the last of the 16 categories. Top priorities were "a good education, better health care, better job opportunities, an honest and responsive government, and affordable, nutritious food."
3. Lomborg: "Providing the world's most deprived countries with solar panels instead of better health care or education is inexcusable self-indulgence. Green energy may be good to keep on a single light or to charge a cellphone. But they are largely useless for tackling the main power challenges for the world's poor."

4. According to the World Health Organization, 3 billion people suffer from the effects of indoor pollution because they burn wood, coal or dung to cook. Obviously, these people need affordable, reliable electricity, but, because clean alternatives are often not “renewable,” no funding results. Lomborg reports that a 2014 study by the Center for Global Development found that “more than 60 million additional people in poor nations could gain access to electricity if the Overseas Private Investment Corporation”—the US government’s development finance institution—“were allowed to invest in natural gas projects, not just renewables.” This is quite remarkable! The bottom-line truth is that climate aid is not where rich countries can help the poor most, and it is not what the world’s poorest want or need. Our priorities are messed up!!

A second illustration of mixed-up priorities is what is happening to the most basic of all human institutions—the family. Our pursuit of personal autonomy and the “seemingly unstoppable quest for convenience” have resulted in the decline in marriage and a drop in birth rates with potentially dire fallout. Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute summarizes the fallout from the pursuit of autonomy and the quest for convenience:

1. As of 2013, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, just over 40% of babies in the US were born outside marriage, and for 2014 the Census Bureau estimated that 27% of all children (and 22% of “white” children) lived in a fatherless home. Further, a 2011 study of the Census data demonstrated that just 59% of all American children (and 65% of “Anglo” or non-Hispanic white children) lived with married and biological parents as of 2009. This trend means that within the foreseeable future American children who reside with their birthparents will be in the minority.
2. In what Europe calls the Second Demographic Transition, long, stable marriages are out, and divorce or separation is in, along with serial cohabitation and “increasingly contingent liaisons.” The result of this shift is serious, for as Eurostat, the European Union’s statistical agency, argues, the probability of marriage before age 50 has been plummeting for European women and men, while the chance of divorce for those who do marry has been soaring. In addition, Europe has seen a surge in “child-free” adults—i.e., voluntary childlessness.
3. In Asia, the famous “Asian family values” concept is breaking down. For example, Japanese women can now divorce, separate, cohabit or remain single—options unthinkable to previous generations. Today, 1/6th of Japanese women are single and almost 30% are childless. All projections indicate this rate will increase in future generations. Similar trends obtain in Singapore, South Korea and, of course, in China.
4. Eberstadt also cites studies indicating similar rates of singleness and childlessness are present in Morocco, Lebanon and Libya, where some of the rates are higher than those in Western Europe!

Eberstadt poignantly observes that “Our world-wide flight from family constitutes a significant international victory for self-actualization over self-sacrifice, and might even be said to mark a new chapter in humanity’s conscious pursuit of happiness. But these voluntary choices also have unintended consequences . . . In the decades ahead, ever more care and support for seniors will be required for the growing contingent among the elderly who will be victims of dementia, or are childless and socially isolated. Remember, a longevity revolution is also under way. Yet, by some cosmic irony, family structures and family members will be less capable, and perhaps also less willing, to provide that care and support than ever before.” Government will then need to step in and provide such care—and do so through increased taxation and/or increased borrowing. This will not only be in America, but throughout the world.

The family is God’s most important bedrock institution for civilization. Its stability or lack therefore affects everything else. The Bible is also clear that caring for the poor and the helpless is one of the greatest manifestations of godliness and righteousness (e.g., James 1:27). Forcing nations to choose between climate-focused aid and aid to the poor is both unwise and potentially sinful. We are now living with the consequences of these mixed-up priorities.

See Nicholas Eberstadt, “The Global Flight from the Family” in the *Wall Street Journal* (21-22 February 2015) and Bjorn Lomborg, “This Child Doesn’t Need a Solar Panel” in the *Wall Street Journal* (22 October 2015).