

Why the time has come for a Green New Deal

Posted by Joan Russow

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Why the time has come for a Green New Deal Supporters of Rep.-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's proposed Select Committee on a Green New Deal in the Longworth House Office Building on Dec. 10. (Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

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By Katrina vanden Heuvel

Columnist

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Almost 20 years ago, writer Mark Hertsgaard suggested a bold idea to upend the climate debate. Arguing that ambitious climate action was politically impossible without simultaneously meeting people's economic needs, he proposed a massive public works program to "retrofit everything from our farms to our factories" that would be "a huge source of jobs, profits, and general economic well-being." He called it the Global Green Deal.

Now, as climate scientists warn ever more urgently that humanity must immediately transform and decarbonize our economies to avoid an unlivable future, this idea's political moment has finally arrived. A new generation of progressive activists and lawmakers has forced debate over a Green New Deal into the national conversation. Likely 2020 Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Cory Booker are just two of the scores of elected officials who have endorsed a Green New Deal. Rep.-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) is organizing House Democrats to draft and pass corresponding legislation.

The Republican-controlled Senate may well reject such legislation, but that would only put the GOP further on the wrong side of history and clarify voters' choices for 2020. A Green New Deal is both smart politics and smart policy, not to mention the only practical way at this late date to preserve a livable planet for our children. One of its core elements is a federal job guarantee, with a livable wage and health insurance, for all who want to work. This provision promises to attract vast numbers of economically struggling voters, making it politically risky for Republicans to oppose it.

A Green New Deal might even make a climate ally out of Joe Manchin III, the West Virginia Democrat slated to become the ranking member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources

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Committee. It would enable Democrats to help the coal miners whom candidate Donald Trump promised to protect but betrayed as president. Like oil and gas workers and others whose jobs make climate change worse, coal miners under a Green New Deal would receive paid retraining and placement in climate-friendly, well-paying alternative jobs, such as constructing zero-energy buildings or retrofitting water systems for climate resiliency. All members of Congress should take note: Retrofitting our buildings to make them super energy efficient is a labor-intensive task that needs doing in every district in the United States, and it cannot be outsourced. These jobs will stimulate additional local economic activity by keeping workers employed and spending paychecks.

How refreshing it is to hear environmental champions saying “yes!” to ideas. Too often, the green message has been negative — don’t build that pipeline, don’t hurt that critter — without offering a corresponding positive vision, thus feeding the perception that environmentalism is for elites who can afford to sacrifice. By contrast, a Green New Deal is shrewdly packaged, leaves little doubt about its purpose and, polls show, is popular with the public. A new Yale survey found that a Green New Deal is supported by a staggering 81 percent of registered voters.

Much of the credit here goes to Ocasio-Cortez, who has melded inspiring eloquence with hard-nosed political organizing. “This is going to be the New Deal, the Great Society, the moon shot, the civil rights movement of our generation,” she recently said. By championing environmental justice as a foundational principle of a Green New Deal — prioritizing employment for the communities that historically have borne the brunt of pollution — Ocasio-Cortez is counting on building the popular pressure needed to overcome Big Oil’s long-standing stranglehold over federal policy.

Predictably, Republicans are squawking about who would pay for a Green New Deal. They should learn some history: The original New Deal’s deficit spending is what pulled the U.S. economy out of the Great Depression in the 1930s. They should also check their hypocrisy: Republicans just passed President Trump’s \$1.7 trillion tax cut, which grew nothing except the federal deficit and their rich donors’ investment portfolios.

Failing to agree on climate action would “not only be immoral” but “suicidal,” U.N. Secretary General António Guterres said at the U.N. climate conference that concluded Saturday in Poland. In other words, the most vulnerable people are already suffering, but eventually, all humanity could perish if countries do not act. The Poland conference agreed on rules to implement the Paris Agreement but failed to make “clear that global emissions from fossil fuels must be cut by half by 2030” to do so, said Johan Rockstrom, of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research.

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Which is why Hertzgaard's original vision remains correct: To spur the necessary action globally, a Green New Deal in the United States must be mirrored, soon, by a Global Green Deal. The scientific fact is that humanity is facing a roaring climate emergency, one that grows more imposing with each day of denial and delay. A Green New Deal offers our best chance to choose a different future, while we still have a chance.