

Affirmative Action for Natural Gas

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Yesterday, At a Public Hearing on two bills that would create a State Energy Authority which would support the natural gas industry with State bonds and long term contracts backed by taxpayers and ratepayers, the Republican sponsor of the bills, Ken Fredette, stated that it was “moral outrage” that so many people use heating oil to heat their homes in Maine. His moral outrage was apparently bolstered by his assertion (true) that Maine has the highest percentage of people using heating oil (70%) in the nation. Later on in the hearing another term was used in a similar context - “disproportional” - as in the disproportional use of heating oil compared to other energy sources in the State. These claims raise many questions. Why exactly is it outrageous for Maine citizens to pick a clean, safe, efficient, and mostly affordable energy source to heat their homes? Exactly what proportion would be morally unobjectionable and who determines it?

Was it morally objectionable that the people in Maine paid less to heat their homes with oil for 28 out of the last 35 years when compared to natural gas? If 50% of the people in Maine had used natural gas they would have proportionally paid that much more for those 28 years. Likewise, is it outrageous that those States that have over 90% natural gas heating saturation paid more to heat their homes most of the time? Who gets to claim the outrage?

The sponsor doesn't seem concerned that the State, with its history of picking winners and losers in the energy markets in place of the free market, has over the last 35 years made “public policy decisions” that were termed yesterday by State energy experts with a memory of these things as “disastrous” policies for Maine people. When the State entered the electric market with long term contracts to fix so called “market failures” the state has cost Mainers many billions of dollars. Dollars we are still paying and dollars that would be in everyone's pocket had the State let the market function. Sure a few cronies got rich off the schemes, but all of us are still paying the price.

Are there other industries that we find the lack of diversity as objectionable? For example, I see very few Volkswagen Passat's (which I drive) even though they are very fuel efficient, fun, affordable and reliable. I am morally outraged that not more people have them. Perhaps the state should declare Toyota Camry's and Honda Accords's a “dark stain” on Maine (another term for our heating oil use from the natural gas proponents at the hearings). Someone should therefore provide vouchers at taxpayer expense, and perhaps long term contracts to buy the existing 2013 Passat's for the next 20 years – since we know technology won't change, prices will favor VW's, plus we have too many Hondas and Toyotas, and that this will be the best and least morally objectionable car for the foreseeable future.

Using this logic for the energy markets we ask whether all forms of energy and technology get divided equally in Maine? Should electric, heating oil, propane, pellets, wood, geothermal, micro turbines, solar, etc..., all get a just and equal percentage managed by the government Energy Authority designed to

mete out and ensure moral equality in order to avoid outrage? Even if prices for each is vastly different and continuously changing in unforeseen and volatile ways? Government knows best.

The Maine home heating market is actually functioning effectively. Many are upgrading to more efficient equipment and weatherizing –this saves money not matter what the source. Some are changing fuel sources to natural gas, propane, wood and heat pumps – and some will switch back to oil when the price drops. I trust the people of Maine to make the right decisions for themselves. With the State making these decisions, what could go wrong?

I am not sure of the term for natural gas affirmative action, but for those who remember from a few years ago, Volkswagen's was – *Fahrvergnügen*.