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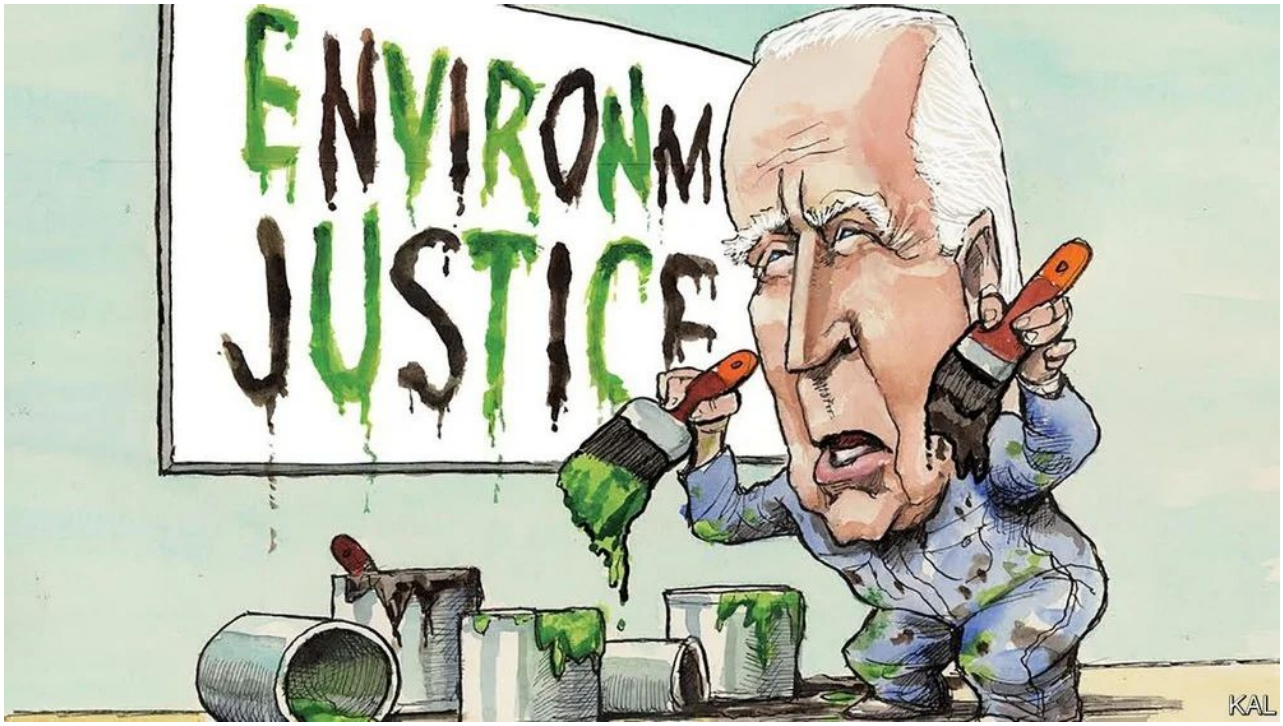
Environmental justice in the balance

The case for pursuing civil rights and climate policy in tandem has been oversold



Jan 29th 2022

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS ago this month the United Church of Christ published a report that inspired a movement. Entitled "Toxic wastes and race in the United States", it documented what activists had long claimed. Hazardous-waste sites were so likely to be found in non-white neighbourhoods that the race of the local populace was the most reliable predictor of their whereabouts. Three in five black and Hispanic Americans lived near toxic sludge. One of the study's architects, Benjamin Chavis, a former aide to Martin Luther King, termed this "environmental racism".

It established a link between civil rights and environmentalism, and created a new cause, which was named after an alternative slogan: "environmental justice". Justice activism is dedicated to lifting the disproportionately heavy burden that environmental problems, from pollution to coastal erosion, place on racial and other minorities. And on that score it has largely failed. A follow-up study in 2007 found that the communities living closest to pollution were as non-white as before, and there is little reason to think the situation has improved. But notwithstanding its lack of success the justice movement has become hugely influential.

In 1994 Bill Clinton ordered every federal agency to make "environmental justice part of its mission". The movement was soon spawning innumerable doctoral theses and a racially loaded lexicon. Polluted areas are deemed "sacrifice zones" and investors' tendency to ignore them "green-lining". As Democrats' focus on racial and green concerns increased, so did the prominence of such activism. The Green New Deal, a Utopian policy pushed by left-wingers in 2019, was laced with justice language and goals. President Joe Biden has embraced both. After his inauguration he pledged that "at least 40% of the overall benefits" of his planned splurge on renewable energy and other climate-related infrastructure would go to "disadvantaged communities". He also established several enabling authorities, including the Environmental Justice Advisory Council, led by veteran activists.

This development has been almost unquestioned on the left, even by those who rightly dispute one of its premises. Racism is not the only reason pollution afflicts minorities: waste dumps are placed on cheap land where poor communities—white as well non-white—live. Nonetheless, the combination of covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests has made the languishing of minorities politically unacceptable. Justice activism seems to offer an explanation for and a solution to it. And Mr Biden's climate splurge, maybe the biggest thing his administration will achieve, looks to many like the means to pay for it. What's not to like?

Perhaps a lot. The overarching problem is the activists' elision of environmental problems that are long-standing and local with global warming. That is also an equity issue, but not chiefly because of its toll on American minorities. Several hundred million people in African and South Asian countries, whose contributions to global emissions are a rounding-error, are suffering far more serious warming, to which they are incomparably more vulnerable. The moral imperative for rich emitters such as America is therefore to slash their emissions. And there are reasons to fear that the justice movement could make that daunting task even harder.

Consider the incoherence of the administration's justice goals. It is unclear what its promised "benefits" to poor communities are. Wind turbines cannot be situated chiefly on the basis of race—and how, anyway, should their benefits be counted? The activists sought to clarify matters with a list of recommended investments, but this raised a bigger problem. Many of their suggestions have little or no direct connection to climate change. For example: "We should invest in transportation hubs because the communities that are most impacted by the lack of access to transportation are the low-income, people of colour and elderly communities." Lexington is all for win-wins. But the notion that limited government spending on the climate emergency could cover a general socioeconomic upgrade seems dubious, and arguments to the contrary a distraction at best.

Many activists want worse. Extending the notion of justice to retribution, they oppose any climate solution that past polluters might profit from. Thus the White House advisory committee ruled that carbon capture and storage, nuclear power and the development of carbon markets (all of which are probably essential) could not be counted as "benefits". Other justice activists oppose using hydrogen as a fuel, even when it is produced with renewable energy—apparently because it does not conform to their bucolic vision of a wind-and-solar powered world. The administration, to its credit, has pushed back. Yet the prominence it has given to such muddle-headedness has invited trouble. Justice activists are "frustrated" with the administration's slow progress, says one. Two of her colleagues quit their White House posts this month. Bigger fights loom, she predicts, once the administration starts dispersing the billions it has raised for infrastructure to the states.

Justice delayed

The politics of the administration's dalliance with this issue is, if anything, harder to justify than the economics. Though many black and Hispanic voters profess to feel positively towards environmental justice, only 6% consider climate change a top priority. The prevalence of Hispanics in oil-and-gas jobs is an added vulnerability for Mr Biden. He should treat the activists' claims to speak for their

communities with caution.

He might also consider how they are viewed across the aisle. The biggest obstacle to effective climate policy is not Democratic unity, which looks unbreakable on the issue. It is the Republican refusal to take it seriously. There is probably nothing Mr Biden can do to fix that. Yet by promoting a left-wing, racialised view of the problem —even though he himself seems ambivalent about it—he has perhaps made a bad case worse. ■

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This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "Environmental justice in the balance"

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