

Missing links

Column

by Branko Terzic

“Wisdom too often never comes, and so one ought not to reject it merely because it comes late.”

Justice Felix Frankfurter, U.S Supreme Court

The application of political judgment to incomplete scientific information is neither new nor unusual in political history. What may be new is that the stakes are no longer about changes of borders between nations or even over military control of a continent, but the stakes could be global.

The incomplete scientific information concerns the issue of mankind's effect on the historic natural forces which have and are still affecting the earth's climate. The global stakes could be the enormous costs in human life, biodiversity and national fiscal expenditures by future climate change which could have been avoided by actions initiated today.

Some would argue that the issue is even greater than one of climate effects, that the issue expands to whether the Earth can sustain expected levels of economic activity and consumption. This expands the climate issue to that of a larger and more complex issue of “sustainability.” While numerous governmental bodies and NGO's have dealt in proceedings, papers and reports with strategies addressing the sustainability problem, that debate has yet to truly begin in public conscience and discourse.

The future public debate, as in the case of the ongoing governmental-expert debate, will need to look at two major issues and many secondary ones. The first issue, perhaps to be considered the “scientific” one, has to do with estimates of the earth's resources and limits of those resources under some accepted consumption parameters. The second issue is the more difficult one in that it asks the question of what standard of life is to be the minimum “goal” for public policy. Is the goal to be that of some satisfaction of basic and material needs? Or is the goal to be that of bringing as much of the world's population as possible up to the current standards of the consumer societies of the

developed world? Thus, the debate must be in terms of achieving an “environmental” or “ecological” goal while at the same time finding and satisfying a “developmental” or “socio-economic” goal.

One constraint on both goals is that of time or of a time-frame. In that regard the question is framed as one of whether we will quickly come to choices among options which either enhance immediate “quality of life” or benefit our long term ecological security. The second option is framed by the attribution to the American Indians of the proverb that “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.” In my view, our priority must be to improve the lives of the billions of underprivileged today, with today's technology and at today's costs where we can.

This is the time for including the public conscience in the discourse and the discussion. The known science must be presented as fairly as possible. Whether science is truly “objective” is even subject to debate. In science the facts don't always speak for themselves. They must be interpreted. The history of science is replete with new interpretations from Galileo to Einstein and to current times. So the fairest scientific presentation and interpretation becomes the basis for the political judgment about how to proceed as a society.

Most human beings, of goodwill, desire for themselves and others the ability and possibility of living lives of fulfillment. That this fulfillment should not come at the expense of others is also likely to be an acceptable standard. Given these goals and the fact that humanity shares a common home, planet earth, with whatever resources are available or found, means that governments – how we run societies – must present programs supported by an informed public conscience. Political judgments need to be applied with this wisdom. Where the wisdom for such policies originates is not at issue. That wisdom can come at all is the issue. ■



Branko Terzic is the Global and US Regulatory Policy Leader for Energy and Resources at Deloitte Services LP. He is also chairman of UN ECE Ad Hoc Group of Experts on Cleaner Electricity Production from Coal and Other Fossil Fuels and the former commissioner of the US Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. He can be reached at bterzic@deloitte.com.