

Lexington | Salting the Earth

Scott Pruitt seems less deluded on global warming and more cynical. Whoopee



REPUBLICAN administrators of the Environmental Protection Agency have often sought to trim their powers. Anne Gorsuch, a Reagan appointee (and mother of Neil, a Supreme Court justice) cut the agency's budget by a fifth, before being forced out by a pollution scandal. But Scott Pruitt is the first to make a nonsense of his office. A former attorney-general of Oklahoma, with close ties to oil-and-gas lobbyists, Mr Pruitt says he does not believe global warming is caused by human activity and proposes a "true environmentalism", which chiefly involves burning more fossil fuels. Or, as he puts it, "using natural resources that God has blessed us with". Last month the EPA administrator visited Morocco on a mission to hawk American natural gas. This week he was forced by the shutdown to cancel a trip to Japan, where he was expected to visit a coal-fired power-station and tout American coal. As the protector of America's climate-stressed environment, he is either misguided or extremely cynical.

Which of those traits best describes Mr Pruitt could in theory matter a lot. The administrator has spent a year chipping away at the environmental regime of his Democratic predecessors. He has withdrawn or tried to weaken over 60 regulations, including Barack Obama's landmark effort to curb greenhouse-gas emissions from power-stations. Yet he faces stiff legal challenges to many of those actions so long as the regulatory dispensation that gave rise to them endures. This is the EPA's determination, known as the "endangerment finding", that greenhouse gases are harmful to Americans' health. To make his deregulatory onslaught stick, Mr Pruitt would need to scrap that. And indeed, if he believes what he has said about the harmlessness of carbon dioxide and other industrial emissions—which most scientists consider misguided at best—why wouldn't he try?

Sure enough, Mr Pruitt has hinted that the endangerment finding is in his sights. As a possible probing attack, he has floated an idea for a sort of climate-focused Scopes Monkey Trial, a televised debate between climate change believers and sceptics. Yet he is also giving contrary signals, which suggest his opposition to climate regulation may be more selective than it seemed. Well-placed insiders know of no plan to review the endangerment finding. Meanwhile, in arguing for regulating methane—a valuable greenhouse gas, which energy firms are therefore eager to

curb their emissions of—Mr Pruitt has recently sounded perfectly respectful towards the scientific consensus on global warming.

A similar shift, from outright rejection of climate science to a more partial, opportunistic resistance, is evident across the conservative political-business elite that Mr Pruitt represents. There are three main explanations for this change.

First, the scientific consensus on global warming has hardened, making blanket opposition to it harder to maintain. If Mr Pruitt tried to overturn the endangerment finding, for example, he would probably fail. The finding followed a two-year EPA study of warming-related risks, instigated by the Supreme Court. To have a hope of rescinding it Mr Pruitt would need to get an equivalent study to reach a less worrying conclusion, which seems unlikely. In expectation of more environmental regulation therefore, as global warming proceeds, many big emitters would rather write the existing rules into their investment plans, ideally leavened by Mr Pruitt's revisions, than suffer the uncertainty of a hapless effort to scrap the endangerment finding, which would invite a backlash from the next Democratic administration.

This was apparent in a recent debate on repealing the finding by an influential conservative policy network, the American Legislative Exchange Council. While a hard-core of ideologues and some companies—including the sort of regional operator Mr Pruitt was close to in Oklahoma—argued for repeal, bigger firms, such as Chevron and ExxonMobil, were against it. Besides thinking it fruitless, many of the holdouts, including those two, are increasingly investing in renewable energy and other schemes that benefit from the decarbonisation policies they formerly decried. This growth of new economic interests from the environmental policy regime is the second reason for the shift. Mr Pruitt's recent interest in methane regulation exemplifies that.

How to please friends and confuse the people

The third reason for the conservative elite's more nuanced view of environmental policy relates to public opinion—and is depressing. Having been subject to a decades-long misinformation campaign against climate science, conservative voters are so reliably sceptical they need no further priming. Until the mid-1990s Republicans and Democrats were similarly worried about global warming. But after a deluge of bogus science and conspiracy theories swamped right-wing media, their opinions diverged: 66% of Democrats now say they are very concerned about it; only 18% of Republicans say the same. This has transformed the issue from one of America's least partisan, to one of the most, such that the remaining 82% of Republican voters appear resistant to reasoned argument on it: climate change is something lefties worry about, so they by definition do not. That, in turn, makes life easier for opportunists such as Mr Pruitt. Where they once risked being found out by their voters, they can now make whatever reality based compromises they like, so long as they keep enraging the other side. And Mr Pruitt is expert at that.

These forces help explain Mr Pruitt's recent pragmatism, and suggest his actions will be more moderate than his sceptical rhetoric suggests. Even so, he is weakening or scrapping most of the protections he can, while also running the agency down. By one projection, the EPA will cut its 15,000 strong staff in half by 2020. An EPA official describes this approach as "salting the Earth, not burning the place down." That is hardly reassuring, considering the environmental vandalism Mr Pruitt is doing, and the vandalism to America's Enlightenment traditions he represents. ■