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Al Gore's 'Mistake'

BY RACHEL MARSDEN

Should we be delighted with Al Gore, or furious, or simply concerned? Last week America's former vice president made a pilgrimage to the environmental holy land (Europe) to confess that he was wrong about an idea he has been selling for years: that ethanol will save the planet and therefore its purveyors and users should receive government subsidies.

A public figure who claimed to be deeply convinced of an idea after much thought and research doesn't often admit to changing his mind, even when confronted with new information or arguments. But last week, years after he had collected his Nobel Prize, herded investors toward his pet projects, and launched an international pressure campaign for new taxes and regulations that are probably the only way those investments will return a profit, Mr. Gore acknowledged that his position on corn-based ethanol was "a mistake." Fair enough, maybe. The ability to hold conflicting thoughts in one's mind, sort through them, and lucidly explain a process that leads from one conclusion to another, is a sign of intelligence. But that's not really what's going on here.

Mr. Gore hinted at more than just flawed reasoning at last week's "green energy" conference in Athens, stating: "One of the reasons I made that mistake is that I paid particular attention to the farmers in my home state of Tennessee, and I had a certain fondness for the farmers in the state of Iowa because I was about to run for president."

So Vice President Gore's actions were at least partly motivated by self-interest. The Corn Belt's Iowa is one of the early-voting states in U.S. presidential primaries, and Mr. Gore figured that pandering to Iowans by hyping their signature crop would serve his ambitions. He won Iowa and the Democratic nomination in 2000.

Now Mr. Gore admits what economists and ecologists have been saying for years: that ethanol is often counterproductive as a "green" energy source, and that its subsidized uptake has fueled price increases and Third World food shortages. Ever since guys like Al Gore, who don't have to worry where their next bowl of carbs is coming from, convinced each other to dump ethanol down their Lexus tanks at a discount courtesy of the American public, corn has become more precious. Department of Agriculture research shows corn prices this year are 71% higher than in 2005, versus a 55% increase in crude oil. Subsidizing the "market" for ethanol cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$7 billion in 2009 alone, and Reuters reports that this year 41% of American corn, or 15% of the global crop, will be converted to ethanol.

Mr. Gore's "mistake" wasn't an error. It was, by his own admission, a calculated decision that no longer benefits him. The problem is that by taking so long to correct himself, he has already done astronomical damage: Corn is scarcer for those who really need it. Investors who believed the hype now might lose money. Taxpayers have been bilked for billions. The farmers who saw their product subsidized and overvalued risk the fallout of a bubble burst. Even Lexus had to recall 214,500 vehicles last year when their pipes couldn't take certain ethanol blends.

There is one person who wins though: Al Gore. His mea-culpa show will likely keep speaking fees flowing to fund more jet-set conscience tours, even as public opinion turns on climate alarmism. Nice gig if you can get it.

The rest of us are left with a hard-learned lesson: When a politician doth insist too much, and the reason isn't readily evident given the facts, look for their underlying interests. If someone had smelled Al Gore's fingers 10 years ago, we might have avoided this whole spectacle.

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