

Op-Ed Contributor

Turned Off by Global Warming

By Katherine Ellison

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BY now, only someone who has been hiding under a rock would need to see the new Al Gore movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," to learn that global warming is real. Even Time magazine caught up to the degree of the threat last month, with its cover story urging us to be "very worried." Many of us have also winced at the slick new television ad, co-sponsored by the national nonprofit group Environmental Defense, that depicts global warming as a speeding train headed straight for a little girl standing on the tracks.

Well, I for one am very, very worried. As the mother of two young boys, I want to do everything I can to protect their future. But I feel like a shnook buying fluorescent light bulbs — as Environmental Defense recommends — when at last count, China, India and the United States were building a total of 850 new coal-fired power plants. Clearly, it's time for some radical ideas about solving global warming. But where's the radical realism when we need it?

Here's the truly inconvenient truth: Scientists have long been warning that the world must cut back on greenhouse-gas emissions by as much as 70 percent, as soon as possible, if we're to have a fighting chance of stabilizing the climate. Yet even with full participation by the United States, the controversial Kyoto Protocol — the only global plan in the works — would hardly begin to do that. Its goal is to reduce emissions by 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2012. And so far, the best plan offered by American politicians — the Climate Stewardship act sponsored by Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman — has an even more modest goal: it aims to cut emissions in the United States merely to 2000 levels by 2010. And the Senate has rejected it twice.

What we need is something more imaginative and daring. But where's the discussion of anything like that? The "Take Action" page on the Web site for Mr. Gore's movie offers no such vision — the boldest action it suggests is to back the McCain-Lieberman bill. And when I recently asked David Yarnold, Environmental Defense's executive vice president, why his group wasn't offering solutions more dramatic than Congress has thought up, he replied, "Why would you want to lobby for something that can't get done?"

Last June, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California became one of the few elected politicians with the courage to talk about climate change in the language it requires by promoting a plan to reduce his state's greenhouse-gas emissions to 80 percent below 1990 levels by the year 2050. But Mr. Schwarzenegger has since warned of the need to move slowly so as not to "scare the business community."

While the California governor backpedals, a team of scientists, economists and business executives have put forward a potentially revolutionary plan. Outlined by Ross Gelbspan, a former Boston Globe reporter and editor, in his book "Boiling Point," the so-called

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Clean Energy Transition would start by turning over an estimated \$25 billion in annual federal government payments now supporting the fossil-fuel industry to a new fund for renewable energy investments. It would also create a \$300 billion clean-energy fund for developing countries through a tax on international currency transactions, while calling on industry to get in line with a progressive fossil-fuel efficiency standard, forcing greenhouse-gas emitters to immediately work on conservation.

If megaproposals like the Clean Energy Transition, which would get the ball rolling on a global level, still strike us as romantic and implausible, it's only because our politicians, including the well-intentioned Mr. Gore, and smart, well-financed groups like Environmental Defense have denied us the leadership we need to achieve global warming solutions on par with the problem. Lacking such leadership, we're left with little more than our increasing anxiety and that scary, speeding train.

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