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OPINION | COMMENTARY

The Yellow Jackets Are Right About Green Policies

They have distinguished company in questioning the science behind climate-change dogma.

By George Melloan

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A member of the gilet jaunes movement blocks a road near Montpellier, France, on Dec. 11. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Seek out the most basic cause of the French riots and you'll come to a bizarre answer: carbon dioxide. More specifically, the demonization by political activists of that vital element of the earth's atmosphere.

French President Emmanuel Macron stirred popular rage by trying to raise the gasoline tax by about 25 cents a gallon. He argued that higher taxes would reduce fuel use and hence emissions of CO₂, helping France meet the lower emissions goals to which it is pledged as a signatory to the United Nations' Paris Agreement to fight climate change.

Mr. Macron has learned the hard way that voters don't see climate change as a threat demanding personal sacrifices. The rebellion is global. Green measures that caused energy prices to soar damaged Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany's 2017 election. Green energy plans were repudiated by voters in Australia and helped cause a political upheaval in the Canadian province of Ontario.

Voters in Washington state and Arizona rejected November ballot measures aimed at reducing CO₂ emissions. The Journal's William McGurn reported last week that 200 prominent civil-rights leaders have filed suit against the California Air Resources Board. Green policies, they argue, are saddling the poor with higher living costs.

The voter rebellion is on solid scientific ground. The global expenditure to curb CO₂ emissions,

estimated in 2009 by Danish scientist Bjorn Lomborg to cost \$180 billion a year, stems from the U.N.-engineered 1997 Kyoto Protocol. That treaty was always about politics, not science. In recent years global weather stations have measured ups and downs, but data from U.S. and British monitoring agencies showed that global temperatures in 2017 were roughly what they were 20 years earlier.

Climatology is mostly guesswork. There's no way to conduct a controlled experiment to ascertain scientific validity. Climatologists have learned a lot about climate and weather in the past century, but actually controlling the climate is something else entirely.

In a lecture this year, Massachusetts Institute of Technology meteorologist Richard Lindzen posited two immense, complex and turbulent fluids—the oceans and the air in the atmosphere—are in constant reaction with each other and the land, causing what we experience as storms and temperature changes. Variations in the sun's radiation and the rotation of the planet play parts as well. And yet, he said, climate modelers claim that only one tiny component of this enormous churning mass, CO₂, controls the planet's climate.

This borders on “magical thinking,” he said, and yet it is a narrative that has been widely accepted. The story begins with Maurice Strong, a Canadian oil tycoon who believed the Club of Rome's doomsday forecast in 1972 that a rising global population would soon exhaust the planet's resources. Strong persuaded the U.N. to put him in charge of an environmental program to save the planet.

In the 1980s, the Reagan State Department, seeking to get more science into the climate debate, prodded the U.N. to create the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Its mission was to assemble scientists and assess whether mankind was having an effect on climate. The first assessment, in 1990, could find no “signal” of such an effect. Neither could the second assessment, in 1995. But the U.N. issued a separate “report to policy makers” saying essentially the opposite—human activity is making the climate hotter.

Frederick Seitz—a pioneer in solid-state physics, former president of the National Academy of Sciences and recipient of the National Medal of Science—was furious. He wrote an op-ed for the *Journal* in June 1996 alleging the report had been edited after being peer reviewed “to deceive policy makers and the public into believing that the scientific evidence shows human activities are causing global warming.” He and some colleagues circulated a petition to Congress with their complaint and ultimately received the signatures of more than 32,000 scientists and engineers.

Nevertheless, Strong and his American allies President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, who were then seeking a big tax on energy, took the climate-change ball and ran with it. They engineered the Kyoto Protocol, in which 37 industrial nations and the European Union pledged drastic reductions in emissions of CO₂. Although Mr. Gore signed the pact, it was never ratified by Congress. President Trump pulled out of the Paris Accords, the follow-on to Kyoto, shortly after taking office, calling the whole thing a “hoax.”

Maurice Strong died in 2015. What's happened to this “fragile” planet in the 46 years since he raised the climate alarm? According to a NASA satellite survey, the Earth has gotten greener, thanks in large part to a rising concentration of that vital plant food CO₂. That means we are able not only to feed an expanded population but give the poorest among us a more nutritious diet. The French strikers have a better grip on reality than their ruling elites.

Mr. Melloan is a former deputy editor of the Journal editorial page. His book about the costs of bogus science will soon be published by Lyons Press.

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