

Why we must cut our consumption drastically

For the last few months, I have focused only on issues most closely related to impeachment. I have put impeachment first because oaths of office require it and we because without it, everything good will always rest on an unstable footing. But impeachment is a threshold issue, not a goal or end, but only a means. Now that I'm talking to both impeachment people and Greens, I want to go back to some of the problems that made me a Green—problems I believe we can only solve if we are willing to agree that Bush and Cheney are so profoundly wrong that they do not qualify to serve in office.

The first problem follows from the implications that, on the average, the billion people of the developed world each consume 32 times as much as the 5.5 billion of the developing world each consume. The division between rich and poor countries is astonishing in scope. Only 4% of the people on earth are within 25% of the world average income; 15% are above it and 81% below it.

The world has already exceeded its carrying capacity, not of people, but of human impact on the resources of the earth. We've destabilized the environment by using too much of the earth. We can't return the environment to normal without drastically reducing our consumption—not just our carbon imprint, but our total ecological impact. That impact is not a matter of population. It's a matter of total consumption.

If we have to reduce consumption, the question is WHOSE? We have the money and power to muscle everybody else out of the way and pig out at the trough of the world. That's what Bush's father was insisting we do when he said, "The American way of life is not negotiable." But if we follow that route, we're all dead.

First, a person living at the US per capita income (of \$41,890 in 2005) has 32 times the capacity to reduce the environmental impact of humanity that a Third World person has. It is, of course, totally hypocritical for us to demand that Indians and Chinese reduce their consumption and carbon emissions without reducing our own. It's also totally ineffective. And there's a third reason we should go first: it's totally immoral for us not to.

The immorality of failing to reduce consumption is hard for most of us to perceive. Start by looking at the Law of Diminishing Returns. Jeremy Bentham knew that law in 1780. It has never faced a serious challenge, let alone a refutation; it has been used routinely as the basis for marginality computations. The World Bank uses Amartya Sen's formula for it to calculate its Gross Domestic Product Index. The law has been embedded in economics for at least 227 years. Yet its implications are almost never discussed.

In its broadest and most exact formulation, the Law of Diminishing Returns states that the human benefit derived from an expenditure is inversely proportional to log of the income level of the expenditure. We all know this. In its

vague sense, it just means that the rich waste their money and the poor buy essentials. It's hard to deny that a \$3000 car can get you to the same destination that Mercedes Benz will, or that you can get calories and protein from rice and beans as easily as from filet mignon and lobster. But the nice part of the Law is that it allows you to use expenditure levels to calculate average benefits with some exactness. You can find out that the majority of expenditures in the US now produce no human benefit whatsoever—that is, they don't make you live a moment longer, don't make you healthier, don't make you more educated or informed, don't make you better able to do any of the tasks of life that actually make us happier.

Of course expenditures over the \$40,000 per capita line may add to your prestige if you live in a sick country like ours that values wealth above virtue and competence.

Amartya Sen's formula for the Law is at

http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr/20072008_en_technical_notes.pdf on page 356; it is

$$\text{GDP index} = \frac{\log(\text{GDP per capita PPP \$US}) - \log(100)}{\log(40,000) - \log(100)}$$

(PPP \$ US stands for "purchasing power parity dollars; first you have to figure out the difference between the dollar value of a nation's gross domestic product, which is really what you could sell the nation's yearly activity for on the international market, and the purchasing power parity dollar value of the nation's activity, which represents what it is worth to people IN the country. Purchasing Power Parity is something like a Philosopher's Stone for economists because it comes close to being a measure of "use value", a value that has existed in theory for 200 years yet has not any good means of measurement.)

The result is a number between 0 and 1. Sierra Leone presently has the lowest GDP index, .29, because its GDP is PPP\$551; Luxembourg, the US, and Ireland share the highest, 1.00, because they're at PPP\$40,000 or higher. IN 2004 the world average was .75, which was equivalent to \$8,833.

If the average person in Sierra Leone gets PPP\$550 this year, that person's welfare as measured by the GDPI rises from .29 to .41. If you give PPP\$550 to a person living at the world average income of \$8,833, that person's welfare increases only from .75 to .76, only one twelfth as much. If you give the same amount to the average US citizen, welfare does not increase at all. The real value of money increases drastically the poorer the person you give it to.

These numbers, of course, themselves don't seem real. So I'll tell you how I discovered that they ARE real. In May 1995 I was living in the South Indian village of Pedakakani, in the home of my wife's parents. A woman, Venkatama,

talked to my sister-in-law for an hour. Then my sister-in-law talked to her parents for an hour. Then she came to me.

She said, “Venkatama just came from the doctor. He says she has filarial.”

“That’s elephantiasis,” I asked, “Your legs swell up, then it kills you, right?”

“Yes,” she said. “We have a favor to ask you.”

“What?”

“Can you pay for her shots?”

“How much are they?”

“Eight vials are 120 rupees.”

“That’s \$4.00. You are asking me to spend \$4 to save her life.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get another chance to save someone’s life for just \$4. Why have you been talking for 2 hours? Just to decide if you could ask me for the money?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you need to talk for two hours to do that?”

“It’s a lot of money.”

I knew I didn’t understand something. I gave her the 120 rupees, she took Venkatama to a pharmacy in town, bought the vials, and took her to the doctor for her first injection. Venkatama came to the house, put her hands together, bowed, and thanked me.

The next day Venkatama came to the house, bowed, and thanked me.

She did this every day for a month—the time it took to get the 8 shots.

I thought she might be crazy. No one treated her as if she were. I thought she might be oddly servile. No one treated her as if she were. I got more and more puzzled as the month went on.

She lived a block away. She had a round mud hut about 7 feet in diameter. A banana leaf roof, a mud floor, an ill-fitting wattle door. A couple of straw mats on the floor, two pots, three plates, 3 spoons. Two sons, 9 and 11. A change of clothes

for each. Laundry was on Sundays. She cooked outdoors on a little mud fireplace on the ground. Her sons gathered sticks for fuel. She worked in a tobacco barn.

I thought it would be embarrassing to ask how much she earned. But finally I asked my sister-in-law. No, it wasn't embarrassing; everyone knew she earned 13 rupees a day because that's what ALL women earned in tobacco barns and fields.

Government rationed rice as then 8 rupees a kilogram. Lentils were 15 to 20 depending on the type. A green pepper would cost 2 to 3 rupees. She made a pot of rice and a pot of dal each morning and put a bit of vegetable in the dal. The three of them ate breakfast, put a lid on the leftovers, and finished the two pots at night. Just about exactly 13 rupees a day.

Venkatama's husband was an itinerant tailor. He'd travel for 6 months at a time and come back with enough money to pay the rent for 6 months, then leave again after a week or two.

In May, 1995, 13 rupees was 39 cents.

I started to get the idea. 120 rupees was 9.23 days labor for her. There was no work on Sundays. She had her choice: let the kids and her starve for 10 or 11 days, or keep on working until she couldn't stand and then let them all starve while she died.

Well, how much did I earn in 9.23 days of work? In January, 1995, I'd left a job teaching in the South Bronx where I was earning about \$35,000 a year. I took out my calculator and divided by the number of days in the school year to figure out what I earned each day. I found I'd been earning a bit less than \$191 a day. Each 9.23 days I earned \$1761, That was 448 times what Venkatama could earn in a day.

What if I took a hospital bill for \$1761 down the street to some guy I'd never met, I asked him, "Will you pay it?" and he said, "Sure, when else will I get a chance to save somebody's life for a paltry amount like that?" How many times would I thank him?

Would I think of his thinking it was a paltry amount?

I'd thought I was relatively poor.

So I began to understand that I didn't know the value of my own money. When I went back to the US for few months, if I went to a movie, I knew I had a choice: I could buy a \$4 tub of popcorn or I could save a life.

When I returned to South Asia, I knew I couldn't spend money the way I used to. But I didn't want to live on 13 rupees a day either. On 13 rupees I couldn't DO anything. I wanted to be able to do things. So I thought, what's fair?

At the end of Plato's Republic, Glaucon asks Socrates, "Will this Republic ever happen?" Socrates says, "No, probably not." Glaucon asks, "So why have you been talking about it so long?" Socrates says, "If I can figure out how I would live if the world were good, then I can know what to do. I just have to live the way I would live if the world were good."

I knew the Law of Diminishing Returns, had been reading Human Development Reports for a while, and knew their formulas. I knew money produces the most benefit when it is in the hands of the poorest people. So we could maximize the benefits of wealth if all the people who have more than the world average gave their excess over the average to people with less than the average. I had no expectation of this happening, of course. But it told me what to do: live as if people wanted everyone to have the most benefit possible from the world's resources. Live on the world average income, adjusted for purchasing power parity in whatever country I'm in. That's what I started to do in 1996.

My family and I have 11 years of experience of this now, and I've done it alone or with them in India (7 years), Nepal (10 months), the UK (6 months), Canada (2 months), the US (3 years, 3 months). Every year we can have a raise; the world average income goes up. It's difficult—just barely possible--to do it alone; single people pay a much larger proportion of their income for rent and transportation than families do. The more people who live together, the easier it is to live well. For larger groups the savings are really substantial because you can share all kinds of more expensive items. People don't really need individual cars, washers, dryers, stoves, printers, libraries: most of the time these things sit idle. We in the US have forgotten how to cooperate with each other. In India and Nepal nearly everyone cooperates regarding all sorts of things like these. What keeps people from being content on the world average income—and incomes much lower—is limitations on love and cooperativeness. And increasing love and cooperation leads to a lot more happiness than stashing away more THINGS. I am vastly happier than I was when I was richer.

After 11 years I can tell you with certainty, we'd be a lot better off spending a lot less money and giving substantial hunks of our income—that is, a lot more than tithing for nearly all of us—to people with less. It's more satisfying.

All of this, of course, is not to be confused immediately with legislation because law is not about morality—or happiness—it is about what it is moral to force people to do. It will take a great deal of work, negotiation, education, and social change to figure out what it is appropriate to legislate in order to guarantee the poor their share of the world's resources. For surely they deserve some share of the world's resources; the burden of proof that they do not deserve an EQUAL share belongs on those who claim it doesn't, for mere prior occupation, as Rousseau and Henry George pointed out, is the basic source of most inequality. Certainly the premise that all money legally obtained is morally obtained is false—for the same reason—that the law is not about morality, but only about

what it is moral to force people to do. So if we want to be ethical people, we have to think about the morality of money.

I do not know a politician who does not minimize these issues. Either they don't understand them clearly, or they are beguiled by wishful thinking, or they know that they're a hard sell for the US electorate—which is certainly true—and so cynically decline to mention them. Al Gore, for instance, shows you greenhouse gases and temperatures increasing exponentially, but does not tell you either that you must make an individual commitment to reduce your consumption or that the government will have to force us to reduce our consumption if we are to survive. Instead he just tells you there's lots of technology that can fix the problem and there are lots of new jobs in installing the technology—which is true, of course—but it does not touch the remaining necessity to reduce consumption and does not even admit the gross immorality, cruelty, and the high probability that warfare will be necessary to force the Third World not increase their consumption. The prospect of failing to decrease our consumption, if we understand it, should frighten and sicken us.

Because the Democrats fail to deal forthrightly with issues like this I joined the Green Party and feel I must run for Congress. We cannot expect that the Democrats will pursue this issue—or any of the 8 others that were on my fliers in 2006—vigorously.

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