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Wisconsin Could Take Lead in Clean Energy

By: Joel Rogers, Guest Editorial

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"Drillin' and Dylan" was a nice summary of the recent headlines - press coverage alternatively of the president's new energy policy and the 60th birthday of one of our favorite Bobs.

It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast in personalities and achievements. George W. Bush is a WASP, born to every possible privilege, who smashed a succession of precious gifts until he was given a baseball team; his biggest (not to be slighted, mind you) personal accomplishment in life seems to have been that he stopped drinking late in it. Dylan is a Jewish kid from modest roots in the Midwest who's been working on his songbook it seems forever, and has become the Shakespeare of our time.

The first now serves as the finely polished mouthpiece for the varied corporate interests fully commanding a national government now so corrupt we can't even figure out who won election to it, but only how much they paid. The second is looking a bit long in the tooth these days, and discouraged; that self-congratulatory show biz Vincent Price routine at the Academy Awards, where his "Things Have Changed" won best song, is a case in point. But we all have our bad days, and he has given all of us so many good ones, and he's certainly still rockin'.

Now on the rocks that Bush proposes to drill, enough has been said I suppose (perhaps we should begin to scream?). What he proposes is not a new energy policy, but an old one. In some cases almost eerily old, as in the proposed reinstatement of reduced liability for nuclear plants. In execution and consequence it will hurt the environment more, and it is otherwise dangerous to our health. Ever build or work in an oil refinery, which Bush wants to further deregulate? And his courting of the Teamsters Union, dangling thousands of high-paying jobs to produce this additional carnage but only if they help smash environmentalists, can only be described as grotesque.

What is truly maddening here is that an attractive, and highly job-generating, alternative set of possible practices is known. These would, essentially, combine increasingly strict environmental regulation with the technical know-how to meet them. The result is a win for both jobs and the environment - and, as the latest news from the Middle East reminds, our national security.

In general terms, it should always be remembered, there simply is no trade-off between jobs and the environment - though that's another hoary myth that Bush, and in our state the Wisconsin Manufacturing & Commerce business group, is again promoting. It's simply a matter of which jobs get created: those that are part of a dirty industrial system, or those that are part of a clean one. The problem in our national policy on this is that the companies that are part of the old dirty system - auto and oil the most prominent - have more political power than the companies that are part of the clean one. So they block the regulation and use of government purchasing power - e.g., to bring the price of solar or hydrogen energy production, which no one any longer disputes can be much cheaper than our current fossils - to bring that new economy into view.

Nor should there be any question that Wisconsin firms have the inventiveness to play in a clean economy. Take the Racine-based Modine Manufacturing as one example. Modine develops, manufactures and markets heat exchangers for automotive and building heating, ventilating and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems. The company employs more than 8,000 workers and currently is developing a number of innovative, environmentally friendly products, including air conditioning heat exchangers that utilize carbon dioxide instead of environmentally harmful refrigerants such as chlorofluorocarbon; exhaust-gas recirculation coolers that reduce diesel engine emissions; and heat exchangers compatible with non-polluting fuel-cell power plants. And it's making a nice bundle doing it.

And this is just one of dozens of clean industry companies in this state. Nor are these companies just in manufacturing, narrowly understood. They're also in processing industries of different kinds.

It bears note that these are generally also better employers than firms employing less advanced and dirtier technology. They treat their workers better. They have to. The workers are smarter (better trained) and can find employment easily elsewhere if they don't.

There is also every reason to believe we can generate creative synergies between such firms and our biggest knowledge-based industry, the University of Wisconsin, in a process of both expanding and greening production.

So this brings an exciting prospect into view. Why don't we, in this state, just go ahead and do what our national government has failed to do? Why don't we examine existing state policy and change it to deliberately favor clean production over dirty?

There will be kicking and screaming along the way from those who benefit from the status quo. But there is no question - none - that eventually our overall business community, our workers, our state's competitive position, our attraction as a place to live and work would all be enhanced.

So if this would be fun, exciting, the right thing to do, and doable with our unique strengths, what's the issue? Let's get started. Or as Bob would say, "get out of the way if you can't lend a hand."

Our national government may be awash in the fuel produced in fossil times, but in Wisconsin we can be different. Policy details up next!

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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