John Holdren, Ideological Environmentalist

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A most dogmatic member of Obama's 'Green Dream Team.'

John Holdren

President Barack Obama has nominated a Green Dream Team to guide the implementation of his ambitious climate and energy policies. John Holdren, a fierce ideological environmentalist, will be the leader of this team as the assistant to the president for science and technology and director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Holdren's political environmentalism has been amply rewarded over the years. Today, he is the Teresa and John Heinz Professor of Environmental Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, director of environmental research group the Woods Hole Research Center and a past president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

In his salad days, Holdren was a fully paid-up member of The Limits to Growth club. For example, in his 1971 Sierra Club book, *Energy: A Crisis in Power*, Holdren declared that "it is fair to conclude that under almost any assumptions, the supplies of crude petroleum and natural gas are severely limited. The bulk of energy likely to flow from these sources may have been tapped within the lifetime of many of the present population." This sounds very much like contemporary prognostications of "peak oil."

In keeping with his dogmatic limits-to-growth convictions, Holdren joined his frequent co-author, eco-doomster Paul Ehrlich, in a famous bet against cornucopian economist Julian Simon.

In 1980, Holdren, Ehrlich and Stanford colleague John Harte picked a basket of five commodities--chrome, copper, nickel, tin and tungsten--that they were sure were going to rise in price as they became increasingly scarce. They drew up a futures contract obligating Simon to sell Holdren, Ehrlich and Harte the same quantities of five metals that could be purchased for $1,000 10 years later at 1980 prices.

If the combined prices rose above $1,000, Simon would pay the difference. If they fell below $1,000, Ehrlich would pay Simon. Ehrlich mailed Simon a check for $576.07 in October 1990. Simply put, the combined real prices of the metals selected by Holdren and his colleagues fell by more than 50% during the 1980s, confirming cornucopian claims that the supply of resources over time becomes more abundant, not scarcer.

Despite his early peak-oil proclivities, Holdren did acknowledge in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* back in 1975 that "civilization is not running out of energy; but it is running out of cheap energy." But even then, he was clearly convinced that energy supplies would become ever more expensive. More recently, Holdren has declared that even "peak oil" is debatable.

Also near the beginning of his career, Holdren introduced in 1971--with his colleague and perennial population-alarmist, Ehrlich--the concept of the I=PAT identity. Human Impact on the environment is equal to Population x Affluence/consumption x Technology. All of which are supposed to intensify and worsen humanity's impact on the natural world.

History shows that the I=PAT identity largely gets it backward. Population is at worst neutral, while affluence and technology actually promote environmental flourishing. It is in the rich, developed countries that the air becomes clearer, the streams cleaner and the forests more expansive.

Holdren now apparently recognizes the power of human creativity to solve environmental problems by means of technological progress and economic growth. In his 2006 inaugural lecture as the president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, he noted, "Advances in technology help meet basic human needs and drive economic growth through increased productivity, reduced costs, reduced resource use and environmental impact, and new or improved products and services."

Unfortunately, Holdren doesn't appear to have an adequate understanding of the economic process through which these technological advances are achieved. He seems to think new technologies arise full-blown from government agencies and university laboratories.

Holdren early on exhibited an unlovely tendency to try to enforce ideological conformity on his fellow scientists and activists. Back in 1972, he and Ehrlich disagreed with environmentalist Barry Commoner on whether population or technology was worse for environment. This dispute exploded into the public when Commoner disclosed a letter Ehrlich and Holdren had sent to numerous scientific colleagues revealing that the two had pressed Commoner not to debate in public which of the factors was most important because that would undermine the realization of environmental goals.

Commoner was outraged that the two wanted to shut down debate and enforce an environmentally correct united front. If this is what Holdren would attempt to do to an errant fellow environmentalist, it's no surprise the fury he visits upon those who don't accept the environmental litany of doom, such as Bjorn Lomborg, author of *TheSkeptical Environmentalist*.

Lomborg had the temerity to cite Holdren's humiliating lost bet with Simon in his book. In a 2002 *Scientific American* attack piece, Holdren characterized Lomborg's chapter on energy as being "devoted almost entirely to attacking the belief that the world is running out of energy," which "only a handful of environmental researchers, if any at all, believe this today."

Actually, the chapter can be far more accurately described as critiquing the concept of peak oil. Lomborg opens it by citing a 2000 article from *E: The Environmental Magazine* entitled "Running on Empty," propounding the "peak oil" hypothesis. Clearly, some prominent environmentalists do still believe the world is running out of oil.

Later, an irritated Holdren complained that Lomborg had "needlessly muddled public understanding and wasted immense amounts of the time of capable people who have had to take on the task of rebutting him." Evidently, Holdren finds scientific and policy debates a bit tiresome.

When President Obama nominated Holdren, he declared, "The truth is that promoting science isn't just about providing resources--it's about protecting free and open inquiry. It's about ensuring that facts and evidence are never twisted or obscured by politics or ideology."

Unfortunately, Holdren's record is far from reassuring on that score.