

Resisting Green Tariffs

Germany and the U.K. resist France and the U.S. on green tariffs.

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One of the most dangerous but least reported undercurrents of the global-warming movement is trade protectionism. Now some politicians in Europe are beginning to push back, and we're delighted to see it.

A carbon tariff has been popular on the intellectual left for some time, as a way to sell heavy new energy taxes to Western voters worried that their jobs will get shipped to countries that don't also punish carbon use. The U.S. House of Representatives wrote a tariff provision into its recent cap-and-tax bill, rolling over the muted objections of President Obama. Coming from the world's largest economy and ostensible free-trade leader, the bill is an invitation to the world's protectionists to camouflage their self-interest in claims of green virtue.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy—a mercantilist in the best of times—escalated the threat last month by suggesting import duties to “level the playing field” with countries that oppose binding greenhouse-gas targets at December's United Nations climate talks in Copenhagen. Just what a world trying to rebound from recession needs: beggar-thy-neighbor environmentalism.

Now other leaders are beginning to recognize and speak up about the peril. With typical British understatement, U.K. Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change Ed Miliband said Saturday his government was “skeptical” about the French proposal for carbon tariffs. Germany's Deputy Environment Minister Matthias Machnig was even more forthright on Friday, branding the exercise as “eco-imperialism” for attempting to punish countries that don't follow these green dictates. “We are closing our markets for their products, and I don't think this is a very helpful signal for the international negotiations,” he added. Both statements are notable coming as they do from parties on the political left.

Berlin's criticism is especially important. Germany has been at the forefront of Europe's eco-movement from the start, enriching the French language with such words as “le Waldsterben,” a German compound meaning “forest death.” The idea of the man-made destruction of Europe's trees was the great green scare of the 1970s and 1980s. The forests are still with us, and scientists now believe that the tree decline was as much due to natural phenomena as to “acid rain.” That episode is a lesson in the need for skepticism about proposals that would do tangible economic harm in the heat of environmental manias.

A climate tariff would be damaging even on its own green terms. To the extent it reduced global trade, carbon protectionism would slow the rise in income that we know from the last half century has been crucial to antipollution progress. The richer people are, the more of their income they are willing to devote to cleaner air and water. Several hundred million people have

risen from poverty in the last generation thanks to expanding trade, and the world doesn't need a reversal thanks to old-fashioned protectionism dressed in green drag.