Asinus Muses

Lovelock’s Second Principle

Science makes progress by unifying apparently disparate phenomena. When Newton discovered the principle of gravity he simultaneously explained the motion of the stars, the descent of an apple from its tree, and the path of an arrow through the air. Darwin’s theory of evolution explained the diverse forms of life on this planet on the basis of one simple principle. James Lovelock’s infamous Gaia hypothesis has not yet reached the status of these great theories, but Lovelock appears to have stumbled across another principle whose explanatory potential is breathtaking. We refer to the principle of human stupidity, invoked by the environmental thinker as the explanation for our collective failure to understand and to tackle climate change. ‘We’re not that bright an animal... I don’t think we’re yet evolved to handle as complex a situation as climate change,’ he states, citing, in addition, the presence of a great number of ‘dumbos’ even in the scientific community. Yet just as Newton’s other great discovery, that of the differential calculus, led to a universe of applications undreamt of by its originator, Asinus is confident that this first use of the Lovelock principle is just the tip of the iceberg. Those diplomatic exchanges on which Asinus is so fond of reporting; sub-prime mortgages and the banking crisis; the more extreme reaches of postmodernism; English plumbing; all these mysteries and more instantly become explicable once we accept Lovelock’s new insight.

US EIA: SNAFU

The application of the principle does, however, require judgement. Take the US Energy Information Administration’s recent report on its historical predictions for energy demand, supply and price, going back to 1982. The average percentage error of its predictions for production and consumption has been very respectably below 10 percent. But the error in their price predictions has averaged more than 50 percent for both oil and gas, and more than 40 percent for coal. While Lovelock’s new principle is surely part of the explanation, Asinus reminds the reader that it must be applied with care. The real question remains: are the dumbos in the EIA, or are they the buyers and sellers of hydrocarbons?

Demanding the impossible

A suggested answer comes in a paper by Dermot Gately and Joyce Dargay on the future of oil demand, towards which Asinus has ambivalent feelings. It’s always a pleasure to see a consensus of officialdom punctured, but unnerving when the message is that the EIA, IEA and OPEC have all underestimated future oil demand out to 2030 by about a quarter. Official estimates assume, apparently without justification, that the income elasticity of demand will be substantially lower in the future than it has been so far. Dargay and Gately argue that the efficiency savings that took place after the oil shocks of the 1970s are unrepeateable, and that it was the collapse of the constituent economies of the Soviet Union that kept oil demand in check through the 1990s – presumably, or at least one hopes, another unrepeateable experience. At the newly predicted rate of demand growth, supply, of course, will not be able to keep up. The oil price, after a year of sobriety around the $65–$80 range, made a drunken lurch to $87 in early April. If Dargay and Gately are right, it looks like the oil price may be heading for a long-term binge.

DeLong’s long shot

Berkeley Professor of Economics J. Bradford DeLong may have had a jar once we accept Lovelock’s new principle.

too many before giving a speech titled ‘After Copenhagen, What?’ His answer is four-pronged: ‘pour money like water’ into research on carbon-reducing research; beg the rulers of China and India to get on board, on the basis of their long-term interests; nationalise the US energy industry; and restrict future climate negotiations to seven large ‘countries’ (one of them the EU), presenting the rest of the world with painful trade sanctions if they don’t sign up. Asinus can’t help feeling that in number three, at least, the professor’s usually keen sense of real politik has deserted him. Obama didn’t even nationalise healthcare and Republicans declared him a communist (in addition to a Muslim, baby-killer, Satanist and terrorist). That energy nationalisation may be the optimal policy does not imply that the US political system will allow it happen. DeLong forgets Mark Twain’s famous precursor to the Lovelock principle: ‘Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.’

It’s an ill wind

The Icelandic ash cloud, having grounded flights over much of Europe for several days, has thereby exposed its silver lining: carbon emissions due to transportation have probably been reduced by several million tons, outweighing the approximately 200 thousand tons a day emitted by the volcano itself. Australian climate change sceptic Ian Plimer has claimed that, ‘Over the past 250 years, humans have added just one part of CO₂ in 10,000 to the atmosphere. One volcanic cough can do this in a day.’ Given that the largest volcanic eruption of recent years, Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines in 1991, contributed the equivalent of about one-700th of the carbon produced by humans in the single year 2006, Asinus finds himself again reaching for Lovelock’s new principle.