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5 on 45: Is the Green New Deal biting off too much?

February 8, 2019

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

GROSS: I'm Samantha Gross, fellow in the Foreign Policy program.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives this week describing the goals of a Green New Deal.

The Green New Deal is a challenging thing to talk about, as it has come to mean a number of different things to different groups. Even now, with a document in front of us, it is a bit of a Rorschach test. What you see in the document depends on the point of view you bring in with you. Some Democrats see it as a test of the climate bona fides of potential 2020 presidential candidates. Some on the left complained that it doesn't call for the outright elimination of fossil fuel use. On the right, I'm hearing it described as an example of the march of socialism that President Trump warned about in this week's State of the Union speech.

But let's just focus on the document itself for a minute. It is truly a great society wish list. It's not meant to be a policy plan or a road map.

Most public focus has been on the green part of the Green New Deal. The goals of reducing U.S. greenhouse gas emissions and increasing the climate resiliency of U.S. infrastructure and communities are clearly goals I can get behind. However, a 10-year horizon for zero-carbon electricity system is a very lofty goal indeed. I've blogged about the challenge of achieving such deep reductions so quickly, and my colleague David Victor and others have serious work describing the challenges of deep decarbonization. But these are clearly the right goals – my quibble is only with the speed of travel, not with the destination.

The Green New Deal resolution contains other good ideas for reducing emissions – support for sustainable farming practices, investment in public transit and building efficiency, and public investment in clean energy technology. All of these good

ideas will be needed for the United States to carry its weight in the global effort to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. I'm all for it.

However, the Green New Deal strategy doesn't just take on the challenge of climate change. It calls also for eliminating economic and social injustice, enhancing job security, and providing education and health care for all. These are all noble goals – this is the “New Deal” portion of the Green New Deal. And I understand where this all-in-one strategy comes from. Any economic transition has the potential to leave people behind – just look at communities where the shrinking U.S. coal industry has brought real economic hardship. And poor communities and communities of color stand to be harmed by climate change itself, not just the economic transition. The devastation in Puerto Rico and its slow recovery from the hurricane provide a stark example and show that these communities don't always get the relief that they need. A plan to deal with climate change that keeps the needs of all communities and groups in mind is not just a political imperative, it's a moral imperative.

But still, I believe that the level of connection between environmental and social problems and the Green New Deal has gone too far if the overall goal is to actually enact legislation to move the needle on greenhouse gas emissions. Maybe I'm too practical, or maybe too cynical, but taking on too many goals can be the enemy of actually getting things done.

Let's think about approaches that work – carbon pricing; a push for efficiency in buildings, vehicles, and industrial systems; public investment in technologies that will accelerate a low-carbon energy transition, like batteries and other forms of energy storage. When approaches to deal with climate change have negative impacts on certain groups, let's keep that in mind and work to make them whole. And we need to think much more about resiliency for all communities. The U.S. needs infrastructure investment, but if we make those investments without considering resiliency in the face of climate change, we might as well just throw that money into the sea.

But insisting on combining the climate challenges with many of the other social challenges we face in the U.S. right now is likely to make the difficult task of dealing with climate nearly impossible.

The original New Deal succeeded in pulling the U.S. out of the Great Depression and getting our people back to work. But it didn't, at the same time, try to reform a sector that underlies the entire modern economy.

Let's work towards ambitious legislation to combat climate change, and let's deal with the real social problems that our country faces. But let's not bite off more than we can chew all at once and let the perfect be the enemy of the good, and in getting started.

In the Rorschach test of the Green New Deal, I see a picture of too many good ideas, all stirred together.

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