

OPINION

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Democrats Fail First Big Test on Climate

Kicking the can down the road

BY BASAV SEN



The science on climate change is clear: All countries desperately need to restructure fossil fuels out of their economies.

Naturally, the Trump administration has recklessly ignored this evidence. In every way it's tried to make it easier to extract and burn fossil fuels — and harder to hold polluters of all stripes accountable.

But what about the other side in Washington? Unfortunately, Democratic leaders are also acting like they don't understand the urgency of the problem.

After the election, youth activists occupied the offices of Democratic leaders to demand a special congressional committee to plan for a Green New Deal.

A Green New Deal means addressing climate change through a mobilization on the scale of the original New Deal, which helped end the Great Depression. It means tackling climate change

alongside other social and economic inequalities — in part by creating jobs in solar and wind energy, efficient buildings, public transportation, clean water, and public health.

Climate change exacerbates our society's inequalities. For instance, black Americans are 52 percent likelier than white Americans to be exposed to deadly heat waves caused by climate change. When the oceans rise from melting polar ice, everyone is eventually affected — but Native Alaskan communities are losing their homelands today.

Hurricanes intensified by warming oceans hurt everyone in their path, but are particularly devastating in places like Puerto Rico, with its 44 percent poverty rate.

A Green New Deal strategy tackles these inequalities directly, instead of treating climate as an isolated problem.

It's also smart politics, because bringing down utility bills — and creating lots of good jobs — widens support for bold climate action. Energy efficiency and clean energy jobs already outnumber fossil fuel jobs by a wide margin. Imagine what could happen with a real movement.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi promised to address these demands. But she hasn't kept her promise. Instead of a real Green New Deal committee, she formed a toothless advisory body with no real power.

First, Pelosi's committee doesn't have a mandate to come up with a plan that matches the required scale and speed. That's like easing off the gas but not hitting the brakes on a car speeding off a cliff.

Second, it doesn't have language on race, income, gender, or other inequalities. When even wonky scientists address the unequal impacts of climate change, it's galling that our elected representatives don't see fit to acknowledge this reality.

Third, the committee doesn't have the power to issue subpoenas. It can merely "recommend subpoenas and depositions" to other committees.

This is a serious omission. Powerful fossil fuel corporations have stymied climate action for decades by lobbying to weaken commonsense measures, funding disinformation campaigns, and bribing politicians to the tune of \$78 million in spending on the last election alone — in spite of know-

ing the dangers of their own business model for decades.

It's about time Congress conducted an investigation of this predatory industry, and how better to do it than through a committee dedicated to the climate crisis?

Finally, there's no requirement that members of the committee don't take fossil fuel money. So some of the recipients of that \$78 million can sit on the committee and undermine it from within. What a great way to sabotage the committee before it even gets going!

This is a spectacular failure on the part of Pelosi and the Democratic leadership. Knowing what we know now about the urgency of climate action — the world's top scientists tell us there's only 11 years left to take preventative action — their proposal is nothing short of criminal negligence.

Kicking the can down the road appears to be a bipartisan sport in Washington. That's why we need a powerful grassroots movement to compel our political leadership to address climate change with urgency, speed, and justice.

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