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'Bizarre' report surveys socialism — and pickup trucks

By: Maxine Joselow

The White House Council of Economic Advisers yesterday issued a report on the dangers of socialism that was quickly derided by critics as "bizarre."

Environmentalists also seized on its curious mention of pickup trucks, which they deemed at odds with the Trump administration's rollback of Obama-era clean car standards.

The report, titled "The Opportunity Costs of Socialism," makes the case that modern democratic socialists such as Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) are similar to past socialist authoritarians including Vladimir Lenin, Mao Tse-tung and Josef Stalin.

The 72-page report — released on the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth — marks an unusual foray into dog-whistle politics for CEA, which under President Obama issued dense academic papers on topics such as the gender pay gap and the Affordable Care Act.

Adam Tooze, a professor of history at Columbia University, called the report "surreal."

"To me, it was extraordinary," Tooze said in an interview this morning. "It's barely believable. It's such a throwback to the Cold War."

The report is a "truly bizarre document," wrote Vox's Dylan Matthews. "Its bibliography is a mix of books about mass atrocities in Communist regimes, economics papers on the distortionary effects of taxation, and works by socialists."

Energy and environmental interests have taken notice of the report, as well.

Buried on Page 35 is a table on the cost of owning a pickup truck in various countries. The table shows it's much cheaper to own a pickup truck in the United States, compared with Nordic countries including Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

A big reason for the discrepancy is Nordic countries' approach to combating climate change. Unlike the United States, Nordic countries impose taxes on fossil fuels and fuel-inefficient vehicles.

The Ford Ranger "starts at \$24,300 in the U.S., as compared with about \$40,500 in Finland," the report states. "Fuel taxes, which are higher in the Nordic countries than the U.S., and the fact that paying these expenses requires work and thereby further tax expenses, also adds the cost of ownership in the Nordic countries."

Dave Cooke, senior vehicles analyst with the Union of Concerned Scientists, noted that the report comes as the Trump administration prepares to weaken Obama-era clean car standards and dial back other environmental rules.

"With the Administration's own rolling back of the most significant policies to reduce fossil fuel use and global warming emissions, there is a history of those in power to subsidize cheap energy usage today on the backs of future generations who will be forced to pay for the consequences of inaction on climate change," Cooke said in an email.

"It is no surprise that it might cost more to own and operate a pick-up truck in the United States when other countries have recognized the folly of that ostrich-like approach," Cooke said.

Dan Becker, executive director of the Safe Climate Campaign, similarly blasted the report.

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Energy interests have also taken note of another chart in the report comparing oil production in Canada and Venezuela.

The chart shows that Venezuela trails Canada in oil production by 3,500 barrels per day. The report describes Venezuela as an "industrialized country with highly socialist policies" that has nationalized several businesses. It neglects to mention, however, that the United States imposed sanctions on Venezuela in 2015.

The midterm cycle has seen the rise of several self-described democratic socialists, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who unexpectedly trounced New York Rep. Joe Crowley (D) in the primary this summer (E&E Daily, June 27).

On a call with reporters yesterday, CEA Chairman Kevin Hassett said the report was inspired by proposals such as Sanders' Medicare for All plan.

"As many of you know, socialism is making a comeback in American political discourse," Hassett said. "The goal of this new CEA research is to evaluate the impact of several socialist policies that have recently become popular."

Hassett, who was tapped by President Trump to lead CEA last spring, has supported carbon taxes and written extensively on the economics of climate change (Climatewire, April 12). That places him within a small circle of administration officials who have said they believe in climate change.

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