

New York's Green Energy Roulette

Gov. Cuomo uses up his state's electricity margin of safety to advance his career.

By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr. in the *Wall Street Journal*
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New York liberals are aflutter over their obliviousness to the abusive boyfriend in their midst. State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman resigned last week after allegations he struck several women he dated. "It hurts the most when it's one of the 'good' ones," began a commentary in the New York Times.

Of course the problem here is assuming that sharing one's politics is tantamount to being a "good" person. So anyone who differs is "bad"? This only shuts out unwelcome truths and aids the state's residency in fantasyland.

Take the explosion of political correctness out of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's mouth at an event last Thursday when questioned by green activists. "I don't build any fossil-fuel plants anymore, and I banned fracking, and I have the most aggressive renewable goals in the country," he insisted, according to Politico.com. He also credited himself with blocking new pipelines.

Some of these claims are untrue; all are perverse.

Mr. Cuomo banned fracking in New York, but that didn't stop fracking. It only deprived New Yorkers of their share of jobs and prosperity that other states are enjoying.

Gas plants have been approved on his watch, including one at the heart of a corruption scandal that will send one of his closest former aides to jail.

His opposition to pipelines runs flat into his signature scheme to get 50% of the state's power from renewables by 2030. A new report from the state grid manager could not be clearer: The report uses the word "reliability" 155 times and warns that new gas plants are urgently needed to support the governor's wind and solar goals.

New Yorkers find energy a fitting subject for irrational gestures only because they haven't yet paid the cost in blackouts and intolerable price hikes. That will change.

Mr. Cuomo's renewables goal was subject to no cost-benefit analysis—because there is no benefit. New York accounts for 0.4% of global greenhouse emissions.

Germany shows and a new study of 10 nations confirms: Investing heavily in wind and solar doesn't really reduce fossil-fuel use or fossil-fuel emissions. Why? Adding solar and wind as adornments to a basically functioning grid is one thing. Once you begin relying on them, however, each must be paired with an equivalent gas plant for when wind and sun are absent.

This is expensive, and the outage risk remains, not just because the grid must cope with a proliferation of unpredictable, intermittent power sources. Coal plants, which New York state has been closing willy-nilly, maintain 30 days of fuel on site. The state's biggest nuclear plant, which Gov. Cuomo is closing, requires refueling only every two years. In contrast, gas plants depend on just-in-time fuel delivery from an interstate pipeline system, connected to producing areas (which, thanks to Mr. Cuomo, New York isn't).

In 2014's polar vortex, the Northeast and the Midwest avoided blackouts by burning dirty oil in gas plants when pipelines became overloaded, and grid operators still had to cut voltage by 5% to keep heat and lights on. If the same thing happened today, it's doubtful that blackouts could be avoided.

Mr. Cuomo privately would argue his green posturing protects New Yorkers from worse. Whoever wins the Democratic primary is likely to be the next governor. His primary opponent is “Sex and the City” actress Cynthia Nixon, who wants 100% of the state’s energy from renewables by 2050.

A feature and not a bug is the incoherence of both candidates’ green button-pushing. Closing the Indian Point nuclear plant, for instance, which both joyously support, would mainly deprive New York of its most important source of climate-friendly energy.

The problem is, Mr. Cuomo intends to run for president in 2020, so his pandering will have to continue for another two years while the state burns through its energy safety margin.

Let’s borrow a concept from technologist Peter Thiel, who once noted President Obama’s “touching faith” in capitalism to support the burdens he placed on it.

Careers like Mr. Cuomo’s are built on running down what might be called “good policy” political capital. Mr. Cuomo is using up the state’s margin of energy survival to burnish his green potentials. He is sacrificing upstate’s economy to burnish his green credentials. President Trump may lack decorum, but his corporate tax reform addressed a universally recognized problem, and now future politicians have a fresh cushion for antibusiness tax gestures without unduly risking the economy.

Ditto his trimming back of President Obama’s expensive but ineffectual climate policies: now future politicians can dip their buckets in this well to advance their careers without overtaxing the citizenry’s ability to sustain costly climate gestures that produce no benefit.

This is the good-policy capital buffer at work. Mr. Cuomo is doing statewide what Mayor David Dinkins did for New York City in the early 1990s, using up the buffer.