

opinion

Carroll: Ritter drubbed in debate

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With a \$300,000 salary, Bill Ritter is paid way more than the average academic at Colorado State University. So the director of the Center for the New Energy Economy at CSU surely ought to know his stuff.

For example, when defending the proposition, "Clean energy can drive America's economic recovery," Ritter should command with ease a wealth of facts and figures. At the very least he should be able to win over an audience at New York University predisposed to share his point of view.

Yet in a debate last month sponsored by Intelligence Squared, Ritter demonstrated that he still has not fully moved beyond sloganeering on clean energy into sober scholarly engagement. He and a partner were not just defeated by their opponents, they were drubbed.

That's not merely my opinion after watching the affair. It was the judgment of the audience, too. Before the Oxford Union-style debate, 46 percent of the audience registered support for the proposition, 21 percent were opposed and 33 percent were undecided. Afterward, opinion had made a dramatic shift, to 43 percent in favor, 47 percent against and 10 percent undecided.

And no wonder. Ritter and his colleague, Kassia Yanosek of the U.S. Partnership for Renewable Energy Finance, relied upon anecdote, personal experience and hopeful thinking more than hard data — and seemed frustrated the other side kept rattling off facts.

Of course, a sober advocate of clean energy would have been reluctant even to accept an assignment arguing that such a tiny sector of the economy could drive recovery because the notion is suspect on its face. As Robert Bryce, author of "Power Hungry" (PublicAffairs 2010), reminded the audience, Americans get 140 times as much energy from coal, oil and natural gas as they do from favored clean energy sources such as wind

and solar. So even galloping growth in that sector could hardly stoke an economic revival.

And then there's the problem identified by Steven Hayward of the American Enterprise Institute: "If you're looking for a sector to generate job growth . . . the energy sector, clean or otherwise, isn't it." Not only is there little pent-up demand for electricity, but as Stanford University's Energy Modeling Forum concluded, "Electricity generation across all sources creates far fewer jobs than other activities in the economy," so "subsidies to either green or conventional sources will detract rather than expand the economy's job base"

The former governor and his ally did score some points, particularly in arguing that the cost of renewable sources will continue to shrink. But their understandable optimism at times veered into flights of fancy, as when Ritter insisted that the U.S. could reduce greenhouse emissions by 80 percent by 2050 with the right mix of energy.

Hayward: "Can you give me an emissions inventory for 2050 of specific sources that would add up to 1 billion tons of CO₂ (roughly 20 percent of today's emissions)?"

Ritter: "No, I'm not able to do that sitting right here."

Hayward: "That's because no one can."

Ritter should have consulted his own administration's Climate Action Plan of 2007, which touts the same 80 percent goal but admits that reaching it requires technology not yet invented that its authors simply "hope and expect" will appear. In the Intelligence Squared debate, by contrast, Ritter twice claimed we could get "40 percent of those emissions reductions . . . from retrofitting the built environment."

Really? According to the "Emissions of Greenhouse Gases Report" (December 2009) by the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the residential, commercial and industrial sectors combined produce 26 percent of CO₂ emissions (with transportation at 41 percent and electric power at 33 percent). What definition of "built environment" could the governor possibly mean?

The New Energy Economy is a catchy slogan for a political campaign. But it leaves something to be desired as a substitute for substance.

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