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How Green is Green?

A recent online debate hosted by *The Economist* engaged the contention that government intervention with the goal of creating Green jobs is worthwhile. This issue is timely in that it has also arisen within the debate surrounding the continuing financial stimulus package put forth by the federal government. At first blush I couldn't agree more, but upon further reflection I realize that I do not know what makes a job Green—and for that matter how Green is Green?

The Green label is used to denote some form of improved, or superior, set of environmental characteristics attributable to whatever has been qualified—be it jobs, food, products and services, or even the entire economy. The promise of Green is one of change—change from a world in which the lived environment prospers at the expense of the natural environment, to a world in which a more sustainable balance exists between the two.

Although the term has grown in popularity over the last decade to a point of becoming omnipresent, any explicit definitions of the term, unfortunately, have not. Without supporting definitions and a broadly accepted understanding, the term Green runs the risk of turning from revolutionary to simply being empty rhetoric.

The problem with the poorly defined Green label is that change can be engendered by a simple change of perspective without any substantive real-world change. If engineers work on a coal-fired power turbine they are engineers yet if they work on a wind turbine are they Green engineers employed in Green Jobs even though there is minimal change in their skill sets and responsibilities. If someone purchases a more fuel-efficient vehicle for the sole purpose of saving money on gas, it is a Green purchase or rather an economical purchase which can be spun to appear Green. In short, the movement towards Green implies a progression, yet without a clearly defined set of objectives when do we know that “Green” has effectively become Green?

However, not all Green initiatives lack definition. Take the Fredericton Green Shops program for instance: member businesses are audited annually in relation to tangible actionable items in order to determine how Green they are—whether one agrees if the list of actionable items is appropriate or not is less relevant than the fact that such a debate can occur as the “Green” in Green Shops is explicitly defined.

As we wait for organizations, institutions, and political parties to formulate and express an explicit understanding of Green, and as more and more special-interest parties push for the creation of Green policies and, ultimately, the emergence of the Green economy, it is increasingly important that

individuals hold a personal understanding of what Green means to them. Only with such a personal understanding can we participate in shaping the change we so openly, yet implicitly, discuss. Green is a spectrum, and knowing where one stands on this spectrum allows one to gauge both the promise and peril of a forecasted Green economy and participate accordingly.

To return to the opening setting, I do support government intervention with the goal of creating Green jobs, but only when such intervention occurs within an explicitly identified set of guidelines toward an explicitly identified vision of a Green economy.

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