

## One door closes, another opens to a healthier planet - Ample Air Conditioning

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 10 September 2008 20:00

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*Emma Young*

*Sydney Morning Herald - August 1, 2008*

Lee Kuan Yew hailed it as one of man's greatest inventions, Boris Yeltsin claimed it gave him a cold and used it as an excuse to get out of work. Public Enemy sang about it, at least metaphorically, Jimmy Carter donned a cardigan and had words with the nation about turning it down and Bill Clinton increased its energy-efficiency standards months before leaving office.

The common theme here is air-conditioning. Air-conditioning is not an inalienable right, but in a culture of constant comfort with an everyday disregard for the "energy crisis" if it is going to interfere with a personal crisis, it is sometimes treated as such. Climate control is not, after all, what the English political philosopher John Locke was pointing a finger at when he made a philosophical fuss about our natural rights.

In New York a bill was rejected in June targeting this specific air-related extravagance. The Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, copped a fair amount of heat from disgruntled locals for his resistance to the proposal of a bill that shops such as Gap be fined \$US200 (\$212) for each door or window they leave open as a marketing technique. The commercial idea behind the "door open" policy is that people find it more inviting. The environmental idea behind the fines is that open doors increase the need for air-conditioning to balance out the disrupting heat or cold that billows in with people and their economy-bolstering credit cards. There is also the requisite burning of fossil fuels and emission of greenhouse gases that goes with it.

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In Sydney this winter any manipulation of the temperature is clearly of a warming variety, but the philosophy remains the same. Many retailers, small and large, keep their doors open to welcome consumers and bracing winds alike, necessitating blasts of hot air to accommodate one and beat back the other. The same thing happens in supermarkets where arctic conditions reign in aisles dominated by open, door-free fridges: a blatantly wasteful design possibly motivated by the idea that a glass barrier might prove to be an insurmountable impediment to the purchase of packaged ham. As long as what is bad for the environment is good for sales it all works out.

Back in 1979 in New York, when a summer heatwave threatened to collapse the power grid against the backdrop of a global energy crisis and an unemployed shah, shops including the big-name department stores weren't allowed to cool their stores below a certain temperature. This was just before the decadent '80s hit its stride and you might think it would be impossible for 2008 to surpass the excess associated with that era but apparently not when it comes to air-conditioning. Regardless of any energy crisis, people seem to expect the best, much like John West always told them to. Convenience and energy profligacy is a daily mantra that we won't easily be separated from.

These new expectations are attested to by a recent phenomenon in "energy tourism" accounting for what is estimated to be a 50 per cent surge in petrol sales in Mexico. The jump comes in the guise of Texans who don their theme park-related T-shirts and cross the border to take advantage of the nationally subsidised oil prices offered by the Mexican Government.

The subsidy is supposed to make fuel affordable to poor Mexicans, but has attracted some hangers-on.

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Border crossing in the name of petrol is a rather extreme expression of the popular and political insistence on sticking to what is cheap, convenient or "our right", rather than submitting to measures designed to curb wasteful energy practices in a way that is reasonable, practically achievable and flat-out right.

Of course it doesn't help anyone learning to break bad habits when members of the Bush Administration spent some of their two terms recommending air-conditioning to combat those pesky effects of climate change. And they weren't joking. In 2002 it was a tack derided in an open letter signed by 11 state's attorneys-general.

They compared it to a former interior secretary's inane suggestion that the hole in the ozone layer meant that all Americans needed to do was "make better use of sunglasses, suntan lotion and broad-brimmed hats". He wasn't joking either.

Perhaps then it's not surprising that the Vice-President, Dick Cheney, once described energy conservation as "a sign of personal virtue", not a political priority.

Practical measures to make buildings and cities more energy efficient need to be taken up by more individuals, small businesses and corporations.

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"Low-E" windows that reflect and reduce radiant heat, and building materials that have high thermal mass to help buildings maintain a more constant temperature are possible solutions, but if they are not options we can start small.

Energy profligacy need not be a way of life and common sense dictates we open our minds to the possibility of shutting our doors.

**Emma Young is a freelance writer.**

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/07/31/1217097424368.html>*