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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Boiling the Frog

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Is America on its way to becoming a boiled frog?

I'm referring, of course, to the proverbial frog that, placed in a pot of cold water that is gradually heated, never realizes the danger it's in and is boiled alive. Real frogs will, in fact, jump out of the pot — but never mind. The hypothetical boiled frog is a useful metaphor for a very real problem: the difficulty of responding to disasters that creep on you a bit at a time.

And creeping disasters are what we mostly face these days.

I started thinking about boiled frogs recently as I watched the depressing state of debate over both economic and environmental policy. These are both areas in which there is a substantial lag before policy actions have their full effect — a year or more in the case of the economy, decades in the case of the planet — yet in which it's very hard to get people to do what it takes to head off a catastrophe foretold.

And right now, both the economic and the environmental frogs are sitting still while the water gets hotter.

Start with economics: last winter the economy was in acute crisis, with a replay of the Great Depression seeming all too possible. And there was a fairly strong policy response in the form of the Obama stimulus plan, even if that plan wasn't as strong as some of us thought it should have been.

At this point, however, the acute crisis has given way to a much more insidious threat. Most economic forecasters now expect gross domestic product to start growing soon, if it hasn't already. But all the signs point to a "jobless recovery": on average, forecasters surveyed by The Wall Street Journal believe that the unemployment rate will keep rising into next year, and that it will be as high at the end of 2010 as it is now.

Now, it's bad enough to be jobless for a few weeks; it's much worse being unemployed for months or years. Yet that's exactly what will happen to millions of Americans if the average forecast is right — which means that many of the unemployed will lose their savings, their homes and more.

To head off this outcome — and remember, this isn't what economic Cassandras are saying; it's the forecasting consensus — we'd need to get another round of fiscal stimulus under way very soon. But neither Congress nor, alas, the Obama administration is showing any inclination to act. Now that the free fall is over, all sense of urgency seems to have vanished.

This will probably change once the reality of the jobless recovery becomes all too apparent. But by then it will be too late to avoid a slow-motion human and social disaster.

Still, the boiled-frog problem on the economy is nothing compared with the problem of getting action on climate change.

Put it this way: if the consensus of the economic experts is grim, the consensus of the climate experts is utterly terrifying. At this point, the central forecast of leading climate models — not the worst-case scenario but the most likely outcome — is utter catastrophe, a rise in temperatures that will totally disrupt life as we know it, if we continue along our present path. How to head off that catastrophe should be the dominant policy issue of our time.

But it isn't, because climate change is a creeping threat rather than an attention-grabbing crisis. The full dimensions of the catastrophe won't be apparent for decades, perhaps generations. In fact, it will probably be many years before the upward trend in temperatures is so obvious to casual observers that it silences the skeptics. Unfortunately, if we wait to act until the climate crisis is that obvious, catastrophe will already have become inevitable.

And while a major environmental bill has passed the House, which was an amazing and inspiring political achievement, the bill fell well short of what the planet really needs — and despite this faces steep odds in the Senate.

What makes the apparent paralysis of policy especially alarming is that so little is happening when the political situation seems, on the surface, to be so favorable to action.

After all, supply-siders and climate-change-deniers no longer control the White House and key Congressional committees. Democrats have a popular president to lead them, a large majority in the House of Representatives and 60 votes in the Senate. And this isn't the old Democratic majority, which was an awkward coalition between Northern liberals and Southern conservatives; this is, by historical standards, a relatively solid progressive bloc.

And let's be clear: both the president and the party's Congressional leadership understand the economic and environmental issues perfectly well. So if we can't get action to head off disaster now, what would it take?

I don't know the answer. And that's why I keep thinking about boiling frogs.

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