

Gas Prices Drop

Will Swett
Staff Writer

To all of the Hamilton student drivers reading this article, you are likely rejoicing at the pump, filling up your car with gas at the lowest prices in your entire driving career. Not since 2009 has the average gas station advertised \$2.79 per gallon, down almost 25% from \$3.70 in June. The plunging prices are in large part the result of a surge in U.S. oil production from hydraulic fracking, which extracts oil from huge shale beds by blasting them with a mixture of water, chemicals, and sand. The innovative engineering methods prompted an unprecedented oil and gas drilling rush almost exclusively within the United States, supplying 0.5% of the global oil output in 2008—when crude oil prices peaked—and 3.7% today. While the “Big Oil” companies like Exxon Mobil and Shell dominate the deep waters of the Gulf Coast and frontiers overseas, smaller companies have claimed the Bakken, the Permian, the Eagle Ford, and the Mercellus shale beds. Similar shale formations are scattered across the nation waiting to be tapped once approved by state and local authorities.

The emerging fracking industry has provided these vast geographic regions the opportunity to develop and grow despite the struggling economy. In 2012, hydrofracking was estimated to support 2.1 million jobs across the nation and contributed \$284 billion to the country’s GDP. While Montana and Texas have embraced and greatly profited from fracking, states such as New York hesitate to allow hydraulic fracking within their borders. Although oil extraction could breathe new economic life into western New York,

which has been in steady economic decline since the 1960s, opposition to fracking is at an all-time high with 45 percent of New York voters opposed to the method. Governor Andrew Cuomo has placed a moratorium on fracking, which may be extended for another 3-5 years, pending the release of a health and safety report on the controversial extraction technique. Although the state approved the construction of the Constitution Pipeline, which would transport oil extracted using fracking techniques from Pennsylvania to New York to be distributed throughout Northeast, opponents remain vehemently against fracking within the state. Regardless, the recent drop in oil prices will likely not encourage companies to pursue fracking approval within New York.

Falling oil prices, while beneficial to drivers, threaten the growth of American energy service firms, who are heavily reliant on fracking to extract crude oil. Although the short-term profitability of fracking will not stop small shale firms from extracting oil at their current rate, the long-term market adjustments caused by the current global oil supply will limit the growth of domestic fracking firms. Oil prices at \$70 per barrel will prompt shale firms to cut investment, limiting their potential growth in the future. Eventually production will fall, helping prices to stabilize. Although big integrated energy firms, such as Exxon Mobil and Shell, will take some of the pain, most of the financial burden of adjustment will fall on America’s shale industry, comprised mostly of small emerging energy companies.

Foreign interests have played a major part in threatening American shale oil companies. Despite its charter goal for “the stabilisation of prices in international oil markets,”

Saudi Arabia, the leading member of OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries), made clear it will tolerate lower prices in order to diminish the finances of fracking firms. Since 2010, 20,000 new wells have been developed in the United States—more than ten times that of new wells in Saudi Arabia—boosting America’s oil production by a third, to nearly nine million barrels a day, a mere one million short of Saudi Arabia’s output. The growth of domestic fracking methods threatens America’s reliance on Saudi Arabian oil production, so the oil-rich international exporter seeks to undermine industry growth using unstable market prices. The Saudis have twice cut oil prices to compete with American domestic oil, and refused to cut production amid the growth of shale oil. As a result, the contest between the Texan shalemens and the Saudi sheikhs has tipped the world from a shortage of oil to a surplus.

Although the long-term effects of low oil prices will hinder the development of one of America’s fastest growing industries, the sudden fall of oil prices has been heralded as an economic victory by drivers across the nation enjoying the short-term benefits of cheap gasoline. Economist James Hamilton of the University of California estimated that if sustained for a year, the cheap gas prices would save U.S. consumers as much as \$108 billion. The drop in oil prices comes at the perfect time to enhance the nation’s economy, which is currently experiencing a period of quick growth during this year’s fourth quarter. With more money in the pockets of consumers just in time for Christmas, falling oil prices will likely provide an even greater holiday boost to the nation’s booming economy.

Conservatives Leading Prison Reform

Taylor EliceGUI | *Staff Writer*

The United States is frequently referred to as the “Incarceration Nation.” The U.S. holds 5% of the world’s population yet 25% of the world’s prisoners. Conservative lawmakers, their “Tough on Crime” policies, and harsh drug sentencing laws are to blame for the astounding incarceration rates, right? Wrong. As nice as it is to make conservative lawmakers a scapegoat for high incarceration rates, the facts suggest something different altogether. Since 2006, 58 correctional facilities closed across the

country, with two-thirds of the closures in Republican-dominated states. Many conservative activists and legislators are taking action to reduce incarceration rates in the United States.

Right on Crime, a joint project of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, American Conservative Union Foundation, and the Prison Fellowship, is the nation’s leading conservative organization for prison reform. National signatories include Jeb Bush, Grover Norquist, and several others. Right on Crime’s Statement of Principles declares, “An ideal criminal justice system works to reform amenable offenders who will return to society

through harnessing the power of families, charities, faith-based groups, and communities.” Not only does Right on Crime support prison reform, but the organization also takes direct action. Right on Crime works with legislators across the country to enact sentencing changes and reduce imprisonment rates.

One state where legislators and Right on Crime have made significant changes is Texas. Danny Kruger, former speechwriter for David Cameron, interviewed people in Texas about their perspectives on crime and punishment. He found that “We expect people to do the right thing. ... When they don’t, we punish them, but then we welcome them back and expect good behavior again.” In 2007, Texas planned to spend an additional \$2 billion increasing prison capacity. Instead, Right on Crime worked with Congressman Jerry Madden, chairman of the House Corrections Committee, to allocate an eighth of the funds towards drug courts and rehabilitative facilities. Since then, incarceration rates in Texas decreased by 20%—much more than the national decrease of 5%. The waiting list for drug rehab facilities disappeared. Texas also successfully closed three prisons since 2007. While most think of Texas as the death penalty and harsh punishment capital of the country, new reforms have transformed Texas into a model of efficient and effective prison reforms.

Another Republican speaking out for prison reform is former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. In 1992, Gingrich promised *New York Times* reporters increased prison capacity, “So that there are enough beds that every violent criminal in America is locked up...serve real time and...serve their full sentence and they do not get out on good behavior.” Newt Gingrich is currently working with a variety of people, including Jay-Z, to support prison reform measures, like California’s Proposition 47. Proposition 47 would reclassify many minor crimes to misdemeanors instead of felonies. In a recent op-ed for the *Washington Post*, Gingrich wrote, “Our prisons might be worth the current cost if the recidivism rates were not so high... It is time to fundamentally rethink how we treat and rehabilitate our prisoners.”

Republicans and Democrats can work together on issues to enact real change. Regardless of the GOP’s past, the party is ready to make meaningful change in the criminal justice system. In an age of intense party polarization, it’s tough to find issues where lawmakers can come together and find a common ground. It’s becoming more apparent that prison reform might be the rare area where compromise is possible, and it couldn’t come soon enough to the “Incarceration Nation.”

Vaccination Policies

Sarah Larson | *Staff Writer*

The start of flu season always renews the debate on mandatory vaccinations. Should schools require certain vaccinations? Workplaces? Across the board, required vaccination policies almost always include a religious exemption clause. The religious exemption clause, however, does not refer only to mainstream religions. Instead, religion is more aptly described as a personal belief. Many parents and workers have a personal problem with vaccinations and claim exemption under that banner.

The rate of exemption claims is increasing dramatically. In late October, Kansas schools reported that only 61% of children (more than 16,000 students) who were kindergartners during the 2012-13 school year had received all their recommended immunizations by age 2. In 2009, that number was 72%. That shift poses a serious public health risk that policymakers try to combat with legislation. Colorado, faced with an increase of unvaccinated children, passed a bill requiring schools to report the percentage of students vaccinated. Michigan, a state with one of the lowest vaccination rates, is probably headed in a similar direction after several outbreaks of preventable diseases. Regardless of the merits of vaccination, policy makers faced with the task of penning vaccine legislation must answer a constitutional question.

Does the First Amendment right to free exercise of religion require states to provide religious exemptions from vaccination?

The short answer is that it depends.

On the surface, yes, the First Amendment protects individuals from partaking in a policy that violates their religious beliefs. We saw this play out in the recent Hobby Lobby case where an employer refused to include three forms of birth control in an employee health plan that violated his religious conscience. The employer’s corporation was deemed “closely held” (and therefore eligible for First Amendment protection) and the distribution of birth control via an employer-sponsored health plan deemed not the “least restrictive means” for obtaining that product. The employee can receive birth control through a government accommodation—without compelling the employer to violate his or her religious conscience.

In the case of a wartime draft, religious objection may or may not be a valid excuse for participation. In World War I, an individual could very well claim the right to refuse to perform military service—to be a conscientious objector—because his religious beliefs were incompatible with violent behavior. Nevertheless, the individual still had to participate in military service, just in a non-combatative position.

So the questions to ask in the case of mandatory vaccination are: Is vaccination the least restrictive

means of providing the public good of disease immunity? If that is the case, are the protections of the individuals who conscientiously object to the vaccination, negligible or negotiable?

It seems that in the case of vaccinations, the federal policy is not the least restrictive means. Vaccinations already occur at a high rate without a federal mandate. Vaccinations can be incentivized through other means, e.g., with monetary benefits or tax breaks or a requirement of public health plans. If state vaccinations were deemed the least restrictive means, the individual’s religious objections would be disregarded in favor of promoting the public good. In such a case, the risk of not vaccinating must be quite high.

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