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BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE: Area Code 202. Business Office, 467-4411; Circulation, 467-4417.

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# Public Opinion and Energy Use

A large fraction of the public behaves as if there were no energy problem. This summer gasoline consumption has been setting records. Sales of automobiles during August were at a peak for the month. Use of electricity has been at an all-time high. Consumption so far this year is more than 7 percent above that of a year ago. The present behavior is consonant with polls which indicate that a majority of citizens are uninformed about energy problems. Only 48 percent of the people know that we must import oil to meet needs.\*

Our energy reserves and producing capacity continue to deteriorate. Four years ago the rate of domestic production of crude oil was 9.4 million barrels per day (mbd) and imports were about 5.7 mbd. Today, even with Alaskan oil, domestic production is 8.4 mbd while imports of crude oil and products are about 8.5 mbd. During the first 6 months of this year, imports were 31 percent above those of the corresponding period of last year. In part the spurt is related to decreasing availability of natural gas for industry. Low-priority consumers of natural gas are switching to oil products. Thus, when the next curtailment of foreign oil imports comes, the damage could be serious.

The facts about our vulnerable position are well known in Washington and among educated people generally. But we live in a democracy, and the pace of the nation's response to energy problems is being set by those who are not well informed. In one poll,\* only 26 percent of the respondents lacking high school diplomas believed there was an energy shortage, in contrast to 58 percent for college graduates. Other surveys† have shown that those who believe there is an energy shortage are most willing to turn down thermostats, carpool, or buy compact cars. They tend to use less hot water, close off unused rooms, and insulate the attic. The behavior of these people contrasts with the half of the population that does not believe adding more insulation to their homes will help save energy. Half the people surveyed thought that one must decrease the temperature 5°F in order to save energy. They did not know that a decrease of a degree or two would be helpful.

Surveys‡ conducted during the natural gas shortage last winter revealed interesting behavior. At that time President Carter asked the people to set their daytime temperature at 65°F and nighttime temperature at 55°F. When polled by telephone, people said they were keeping their homes at 66°F during the day and 64°F at night. However, when pollsters went to homes carrying their own thermometers, they found that the average temperatures were 70° ± 2°F during the day and 69° ± 2°F at night.

In this instance the urging of a popular President was not very effective. Other surveys‡ have also shown that exhortation is of little lasting value. The most influential factor is cost. European countries have long influenced energy use by taxing it. However, in this country such a policy is at present not feasible. When asked, "Do you think it would be fair or unfair to you if gasoline taxes are increased until most people drive less?" 26 percent of the people thought it fair while 66 percent considered it unfair. Among those who believe that the shortage is real, the split was 40 fair, 53 unfair. In contrast, among those who believe the shortage not real, the split was 13 fair, 80 unfair.\*

Conservation is the fastest means of meeting short-term energy problems. We will make little progress toward energy security until there is broader public belief in the reality of oil and natural gas shortages. An obvious need is better targeted communication. For example, our dependence on foreign oil should be made clear to all. There are many public interest announcements on radio about air pollution. They are effective. There are occasional items about energy but seldom if ever anything about oil imports. This lack should be remedied.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

\*A. J. Parish, *New York Times*, 1 September 1977, p. 1.

†J. S. Milstein, "How consumers feel about energy: Attitudes and behavior during the winter and spring of 1976-77" (Federal Energy Administration, Washington, D.C., June 1977).