

Lonely at the top at the EPA

It's awfully lonely being Christine Whitman. Love her or hate her, it's impossible not to feel a pang of sympathy for the former governor of New Jersey, now administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. She sits behind a desk in a vast, gloomy office, leader of an agency whose internal machinations — let's face it — few bother to understand, at the center of an environmental debate that has lately become ludicrously, almost hysterically, polarized. After two years in the job, she has, she says, her own way of determining whether she has taken the "right" stand in a regulatory debate: "If I'm getting equally blasted by both sides, I know I'm in the right place."

Up to a point you can see her point. There is little applause nowadays for those who describe themselves as "pro-business and pro-environment" as Ms. Whitman tries to do. With surprisingly few exceptions, both environmentalists and industry lobbies have convinced themselves that the environmental debate is a zero-sum game. Every new regulation is calculated in dollars lost by one side; every failure to regulate is calculated in dead birds by the other side. Perhaps this is no surprise: Even a minor change in the notoriously complex EPA rules can require thousands of people to alter their behavior, or else spend a great deal of money for benefits they can't necessarily see. At the same time, the failure to make these same intricate changes can have dramatic impacts on particular species or particular places. Both sides now spend vast amounts of money and lobbying time on everything from riders attached to appropriations bills to the vast, almost philosophical question of whether the globe is or is not warming.

And no wonder: It's worth it to industry to fight every issue with loud rhetoric, given the money involved. It's worth it to the en-

Where is it written in blood that conservatism and environmentalism must be ideological enemies?

vironmentalists, because the more fuss they make, the more attention (and donations) they receive. In recent years, this bitter battle has been exacerbated further by politics: In the last election, Al Gore solidly identified himself with the environmental lobby, and George W. Bush hasn't gone out of his way to emphasize his differences from the energy industry.

But if decorum has been sacrificed, so too, for the moment, have the prospects for a moderate environmental policy, not to say a Republican one. Which is odd, if you think about it. Where is it written in blood that conservatism and environmentalism must be ideological enemies? In other places — England, for example — conservation has a distinctly conservative face: Saving trees is about future generations. I've also met Bush administration officials who mumble darkly about energy conservation policy being critical to national security policy: After all, every gallon of gas saved is another one we don't have to buy from Saudi Arabia. If we are counting pennies, there are other ways to do it too: Polluted air adds billions of dollars to health care costs, thanks to increased incidence of asthma and lung disease.

Bravely, or perhaps foolishly, Ms. Whitman has set herself up as the spokesman for this moderate position. While not calling anyone names, she firmly separates herself, in conversation, both from the environmental

lobby and from the Republican congressmen who have spent their careers fighting it. (Both sides, she sniffs, "benefit from heated rhetoric.") She also supports several policies she describes as "market-based." Last week EPA published its new rules on water quality trading, which will allow businesses and local governments to buy and sell rights to pollute. Several states have found such trading results in less money being spent on more cleanup. Ms. Whitman also offers the administration's proposed Clear Skies Act — which will allow industry to trade rights to emit certain pollutants — as an example of the moderate environmentalism she is talking about.

The question, of course, is whether the intermediate position Ms. Whitman has carved out is a real one, with real political backing in the rest of her party and the rest of the administration, or whether she merely serves as window dressing for people who have other priorities but don't want to say so out loud. EPA officials do admit Ms. Whitman faces pressure from other parts of the administration — including the vice president's office — to modify her proposals. James M. Inhofe, the new Republican chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, has also failed to mention the Clear Skies Act in his list of priorities. Maybe this is Ms. Whitman's fault, testimony to her inability to play behind-the-scenes politics. Or maybe it's because there is no serious support anywhere for a wishy-washy-sounding, common-sense, cost-benefit-analysis view of environmental protection. Either way, Ms. Whitman's fluctuating fortunes serve as an excellent weathervane: Her success, or failure, will tell us whether compromise on the environment is even possible anymore.

Anne Applebaum writes for The Washington Post.