

U.S. Climate Policy: Toward a Sensible Center

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Excerpt: Wayne Gilchrest, U.S. House of Representatives

MS. CLAUSSEN: It is a great pleasure for me now to introduce Congressman Wayne Gilchrest. He's a Republican from the Chesapeake Bay area of Maryland and has represented that area for the past 15 years. He's the co-chair of the House Climate Caucus, with Representative John Olver from Massachusetts. And I think you all know that with Congressman Olver, Congressman Gilchrest introduced the House companion to the Lieberman-McCain bill. And it's a great pleasure to welcome you here to talk about the bill and what's going on in the House and how we can actually get something done.

[Applause.]

MR. GILCHREST: Eileen, thank you very much, and I want to thank the organizers of this seminar for putting it together to let some of us come here and listen, learn, and express our opinions on the issue, and also to give you some sense of, since I'm in the House of Representatives, how we function over there, that mass of 435 separate entities, organisms, moving in different directions and how we work. To give you a sense of that, think about a compass that has 360 degrees on it. Well, the House has 435, and they're all moving in different directions for different reasons.

But what I'd like do, first of all, I hope--I don't know if you need a five-minute break right now. I don't know how long you've been sitting. Are you okay for another few minutes?

To prepare for these kinds of things, the staff always gives you some information. So the information I've gotten is eight questions that they'd like me to talk about, and I guess that came from the institute. So for the sake of time, I'm just going to go right through those questions.

The first one is: Please explain the peculiar landscape of the House of Representatives?

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: And I think that's a great question because it is a peculiar landscape and there are 435 people in it. Have you ever tried to sit down and get agreement from ten people on very complicated topics? It's tough. The Senate has a hundred people, and it's pretty tough for them to get together. But with 435 people all representing vastly different areas of the country--urban, suburban, rural, pristine areas, very polluted areas, very wealthy areas, very poor areas--they are to some extent a reflection of that community. And so many of these members come with a certain frame of reference about what their role or goal is.

Now, many come because they have a political career, and that's pretty much what they want to do. They like being a Member of Congress, and they raise a lot of money, and they stay there. You find that in other institutions as well.

Some want to help the unemployed in poverty, in Manhattan or Brooklyn or Chicago or Miami or Watts in California; some because they want to ensure that their chemical industries that they represent produce enough fertilizer to put on

farm fields. Some come because they have a vision for the future. But you mix all these people together.

If you talk about any one of a number of issues, you have widely dispersed opinions. Fundamentally, though, the U.S. House is an amazingly wonderful human institution where you exchange information. You have by the rule of the House a sense of tolerance for somebody else's opinion, and then you resolve the issue by voting. But it's that wide dispersal of goals that people have, that frame of reference that they come into the political system with, is both good and a problem.

If you discuss the issue of climate change, it is on almost nobody's radar screen. They come with zero frame of reference, a vacuum of information or knowledge about the basic fundamentals of what drives the climate, the environment, and the geology of the planet. It is virtually nonexistent.

And so when you're discussing an issue like climate change, it involves all of those things--environment, geology, and how the weather system works based on the interaction of the ecosystems and the evolution of those ecosystems, and you say that, you know, within a hundred years we could have no more Manhattan Island or no longer will people live on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia because it's at sea level. It's challenging. So that's the peculiar landscape: a lot of different opinions, no frame of reference to those kinds of complicated environmental issues.

The difference in the dynamic between the House and the Senate is the number of people. It's simply working with 100 people versus 435 people. That's a significant difference, not to mention the fact that they need a lot more money for their campaigns than we do, so they spend a lot more time on the telephone. And if you're going to raise \$10 million, you don't do it like that -- [snaps fingers]. So when you factor in how much time you have for deliberating on issues such as the highway bill or the Space Station or Iraq or banking reform or all those other issues out there, including Medicare, how much time do you have left over for climate change versus how much time do you have left over for raising funds for your next political campaign? And I hope you're all taking this in the very optimistic sense in which I intended.

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: It says: Why is the climate change issue so important to me? I don't know exactly. I honestly don't know except I have a natural, I think, genetic predisposition to love the prodigious bounty of creation. It could be from a religious sense, although I'm a pretty moderate Methodist. I drink wine. I'm pro-choice. And I think it's okay for gays to have a union. So that's my perspective on creation. But also, the future is depending on us making a pretty important decision. And when I see the overwhelming evidence and human impact as having effect on the climate, then I think we have the responsibility to offer future generations our best shot at this. So to avoid hunger, drought, disease, flooding, I think we owe it to those future generations not to pass up an opportunity to correct a mistake before it gets out of hand. So that's my goal over the length of time that I'll remain in politics, and maybe outside of politics.

The other thing is I'm interested in this because I think human beings, like many people have written, are now a geologic force. We are geologic force. We are changing the physical parameters of the planet, and we're changing the very ecology of Earth itself because of our numbers and our technology and our advances. And so for us to move away from that and understand that human infrastructure, if it doesn't become compatible with nature's infrastructure in a relatively short period of time, I think there will be some pretty severe and dire consequences for future generations in the not too distant future, that they'll have to correct the mistakes that we're making.

The degree to which you think this sensible center can come about to have a better understanding of these issues. Here's where I am optimistic. I'm optimistic because I think you can't avoid credible information, the majority of people. And so it's important for myself, John Olver, John McCain, Senator Lieberman, and a number of other people in the House and the Senate to have--and to some extent we have--to create a strategy to get the information that we are beginning to become knowledgeable about to each individual Member of Congress. And we've started to do that, whether it's a pitch to the Rules Committee about an amendment, whether it's speaking on the House floor during what's called special orders, whether it's meeting with members, talking about it, or we have a meeting with the Speaker toward the end of July in which we are going to bring in some very specific scientific experts dealing with the scientific understanding of this and the economic ramifications of not doing anything and the economic possibilities of doing something. And I think this holds some real possibilities for the Republican leadership, for the leadership of the House, to begin taking this issue seriously.

I am optimistic about that because when the Republicans took over as the majority in 1995, there was some real movement to eviscerate the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act and a number of other environmental provisions. So some of us got together, not having ever met too many scientists, but I'd read some interesting books from people like E.O. Wilson about biological diversity. We asked them--a friend of Newt Gingrich's was Terry Maple, head of the Atlanta Zoo, and E.O. Wilson had come in and talked to Newt. Newt is fairly bright. In fact, he's brilliant. He has a very high IQ. And so--not that you--I don't think you have to have a high IQ to understand some of the complexities of environmental issues. And I probably shouldn't even have made that comment. But we knew Newt was smart. So we got E.O. Wilson and Terry Maple into a room with Newt talking about the Endangered Species Act and a whole range of other environmental issues. And Newt simply said he's not going to let a bad ESA bill hit the House floor. And it didn't. So we didn't eviscerate NEPA or ESA or a number of other things.

Now, there were some complications after Newt got elected, and I'll just throw those out to show you how peculiar we are. We became the majority in 1995, and those people who Newt helped get elected came to Washington and decided that Newt Gingrich was not conservative enough. And so for several years, they held a number of underground coups to kick Newt out of being Speaker. Newt survived all those very difficult, very challenging, very hurtful

times, and decided that he was tired of it so he resigned. And we are now still working with the ramifications of that. So we continue to be a very peculiar institution.

I'm optimistic that Congress can move in a direction of understanding what the ramifications of climate change will be in the near future, and we can begin making small steps to provide legislation that will move us in the right direction. But the House of Representatives cannot fill the vacuum of leadership for this nation. We are too diverse. We will make that attempt. We'll try to do it. And a visit to London next week, I'm going and a number of staffers are going. We hope to hook in with a lot of -- [tape ends].

T6B -- connection with the European Union to bring that information back to the House and to the Senate and show what the rest of the world is actually doing. Some of our problems--you think we're in an age of communication. Some of our problem is that we're overdosed with information and we just can't read or hear or listen enough because there's just so much information out there, so many problems that need to be resolved that very few members actually focus on things like climate change or problems with our oceans' ecosystem or forested wetlands and the services they provide.

So we intend to come back and continue one inch, step by step, making other members aware of the problems of these issues, develop policy, which I think we're going to do. But it's also important for this nation to become a leader in the world with other nations to move us in the direction of finding alternatives to fossil fuel for our energy needs.

So I'll stop at that point. I hope I haven't confused you. Sometimes when I talk, I begin to confuse myself.

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: So we'll work to provide a united front from the House of Representatives and the executive branch as relentlessly as we possibly can.

I'll stop and see if anybody has any questions.

[Applause.]

MR. GILCHREST: Yes, sir?

QUESTIONER: Congressman, [inaudible]. I want to applaud your leadership of Congress. I also--I'm sorry. In your constituency, back in October of '96, you played a key role in a very good meeting on the Chesapeake Bay locations of climate change, you gathered all sorts of leaders from around the Bay and citizen activists there in Washington College. You also happen to be in a rather unique position. Arguably, the Chesapeake Bay is really the canary in the mine shaft as far as climate change in the United States. I mean, within 100 miles of the U.S. Congress, you have Smith Island, the rapidly disappearing [inaudible] Island, FDR's retreat, et cetera. There's a film that Steve Leatherman did, "Vanishing Lands," and I gather there's a new film that's about to come out. I wonder if there's a way that you could get some of the Members of Congress on a weekend trip to go to the Chesapeake Bay and actually see that this isn't something theoretical, it's actually happening and it's happening within a hundred miles of Washington, D.C.

MR. GILCHREST: That's an excellent idea. We've taken--I've made some attempts and actually succeeded on a number of occasions to bring people over to the Chesapeake Bay, the Eastern Shore, to talk about its beauty, its bounty, its sense of place in history, even before John Smith came, an area where we don't talk economic growth, we talk about the vitality and the dynamic economy that we have that we've been able to preserve for 300 years, 400 years, with agriculture, with fishing, with forestry, and we've done that increasingly so in recent years in a very compatible sense with nature services.

I will bring them--I will make attempts to bring them over more and more in the near future to express those kinds of things and the potential damage that can be done as a result of climate change, not to mention the fact our sensitivity to an environment based on concentrated animal feeding operations and the loss of wetlands. So we have this--you know, you just renewed my spirit to bring those guys over there, because all these environmental issues can be discussed on one canoe trip.

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: So if you want to come along, Edie Thompson is right here, and we ought to get something like that on the schedule. We'll probably also have to let them shoot some geese while they're over there.

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: Yes, sir?

QUESTIONER: Congressman, thank you. Gary Mitchell from the Mitchell Report. I want to ask you a question that is sort of is about both the Climate Stewardship Act itself and the 800-pound gorilla.

MR. GILCHREST: The 800-pound gorilla?

QUESTIONER: Yeah, I'll get there in a minute.

MR. GILCHREST: Okay.

QUESTIONER: The President has a record of moving from opposition to support on some fairly substantial issues ranging from homeland security to the 9/11 Commission to internationalizing certain activities in Iraq. The reasons vary but the pattern is there.

My question is: What factors, political or scientific, do you think might move the President from roadblock to supporter of this legislation?

MR. GILCHREST: That's a good question. It's a question that we've been wondering about and attempting to achieve for some time. But I think you're absolutely correct. I think the President can move from one position to another position based on being pragmatic about the political landscape and with good information.

I think the pressures of climate change when you deal with the fossil fuel industrial complex, which incorporates a lot more than just oil companies, from automobile companies to tire companies to road contractors, and you name it. That's a little bit more complex. But I think the relentless discussion of this issue with information in a variety of ways would begin to move the executive branch and I think move the Congress.

I would hope that if we work hard enough that within two to three years the United States will be a key player in climate change issues around the world, and I hope linked in with what Great Britain is trying to do.

I've talked to a number of people in the administration. Whenever I get an opportunity--I don't want you to--I'd like to pass along the idea that you think I talk to the President once a week. I don't. I'm lucky if I get up there for a bill-signing ceremony, and then I'm lucky if I get a handshake that lasts half a second, although I found out that if you don't let go of the handshake, you can say something to him.

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: We were up there for a small environmental bill about a year and a half ago, and I had a book, a beautiful little book, paperback, about the history of water, the hydrologic cycle in the United States over the last 500 years. It was written by Alice Outwater. I think she lives in Vermont. In fact, I called her up after I read the book to compliment her on it and things like that.

Anyway, it's an understanding about the hydrologic cycle, how it works and how we have interrupted it and changed it and fragmented it and so on. So I brought the book into the White House because I wanted to give it to the President. Of course, the staff got real nervous about it. They wanted me to give them the book. They were going to give it to the President. It's not protocol to do that at a bill-signing ceremony. I wouldn't give them the book. So rather than get in a wrestling match, they let me have it. And they were very nervous.

We had the signing ceremony. The President comes over, he shakes all our hands, thank you, thank you, thank you, and I didn't let go of it. And I said, "Mr. President," and then he says, "Thank you."

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: You know, I'm not saying--and I have a lot of respect for George Bush, and this is sort of an amusing story. I'm not taking any dignity away from the office of the Presidency. I said, "Mr. President, I want to thank you for signing this bill and for helping restore the prodigious bounty of God's creation. And I would like to give you this book because I think it's a wonderful little piece of information about part of that creation."

That's about--and I've done that; each time that I've met the President, I would say something. I can't say that I have meetings with the President, but we've met with the Vice President, and I have talked to the Vice President about the problem of air deposition. One-third of the problem of the Chesapeake Bay is from the burning of fossil fuel, and it's a significant problem. I've talked to Dr. Marburger on a number of occasions, especially about the issue of climate change and the Kyoto agreement.

So we are out there, you know, with this movement to try to change the direction that the U.S. has in its policy, not toward what they're doing now, because they are trying to do things--you heard from Jim this morning about the kind of movement that we see in this administration, and to some extent, it's good, it's significant. But we've got to stand in the bully pulpit and say there's a problem with climate change. And the only uncertainty that's left is we're not sure how it's going to play out. Are we going to be freezing cold in the Northeast

and in northern Europe in the next 10, 50 years? Or are we going to have problems with increasing disease, drought, flooding, and so on? But we're going to fix this problem.

So I will--I forgot the original question.

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: Yes, sir, Dr. Epstein?

QUESTIONER: Thank you, Congressman Gilchrest, and for your leadership. We had a talk yesterday by James Woolsey who talked about the international security issues and tied terrorism to climate change through the Middle East and our dependence on oil. We had another assault last summer on 8/14 on our grid and the security of our electricity grid. I wonder if that attack, as it were, that fault in our ability to respond to excess demand from the heat wave, whether that's been incorporated into the thinking about climate change and whether as we move towards solutions--we have not talked in this session about adaptation and mitigation, but perhaps the best adaptation is distributed generation and how we feed into the grid but separate ourselves from dependence on that grid. So I wonder if the security issues are being tied to problems of climate change.

MR. GILCHREST: I think the security issues are being tied to a whole array of things. When we shifted from the Cold War to what we thought was going to be a thousand years of peace and prosperity, and we had--my son described it, oddly enough, ten years ago when he was in high school--or how many years ago that was. I remember when he was 16 and I was a Member of Congress, and a fairly new Member of Congress, we sat on the sofa in the living room, and for no particular reason, he said, "The world seems like a tractor-trailer driving 80 miles an hour down a road that's unfamiliar to the driver, at night, and the person sitting next to the driver is arguing with him, so the driver's not paying attention to the road, and a mile ahead is a cliff with a thousand-foot drop-off."

That was his sense of the direction. It wasn't very optimistic.

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: Unless they stopped arguing and started talking. We need to begin to set those kinds of priorities about a vision for the future as far as fossil fuel is concerned, our security, and how our advanced civilization works. And as it continues to become more advanced, people continue to depend more on technology, we increasingly become more vulnerable.

So we have had those early discussions. I would like to say that they are high on people's minds, that relieving ourselves of the burden of having to rely on fossil fuel is a huge step in the direction of national security for the United States. Taking people more independently off the grid so that they can provide for their communities and their homes is pretty vital. And the thing is we're at the early stages, I think of having the technology right now to do that. And it's going to take this government to say this is the direction we're going to move in and resolve those issues.

Yes, sir?

QUESTIONER: My name is Charles [inaudible]. I've really enjoyed this conference, very informative, and I'm in tune with your talk.

My question is a rhetorical one. The theme of this entire conference is "Toward a Sensible Center" of climate policy. Is nature going to cooperate and wait until we get to our center?

MR. GILCHREST: I think as a Member of Congress I have the authority and the ability to answer that question.

[Laughter.]

MR. GILCHREST: Is nature going to cooperate and wait until we fix the problem? Well, if nature doesn't cooperate, I guess the conveyor belt in the North Atlantic we'll be able to go to London at Christmastime and be guaranteed a White Christmas.

QUESTIONER: On a sled.

MR. GILCHREST: Pardon?

QUESTIONER: On a sled.

MR. GILCHREST: On a sled, right.

I don't know if nature is going to cooperate. I think that depends on your own personal conviction, philosophy, or religious leaning. I think--so I don't have an answer to that question. I don't have an answer to the origin of creation. I don't have an answer to the ultimate source of knowledge.

I only know that each of us that has a stake in--everybody has a stake in this, but each of us that has a position where we can make a policy change that is within the parameters of being sane and reasonable have to work really hard to do all of this as fast as we can.

QUESTIONER: Would you like to see the present administration move a little faster on these issues? I get a sense of very great caution and deliberation, and I feel like it's not soon enough.

MR. GILCHREST: I would like to see the administration stand up and say the issue of climate change is important, the evidence is overwhelming, and this country is going to move in the direction to become energy independent and find an array of alternatives to existing technologies.

[Applause.]