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CLIMATE CHANGE & THE MEDIA

Will More Conservatives Experience an ‘R Street’ or Bob Inglis ‘Metamorphosis’?

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Some conservative interests are seeking a climate change ‘silver bullet’ attractive to their ranks and to their economic and political philosophies. An upstart Heartland Institute spin-off and a former South Carolina congressman are among those trying to show the way.

A small, but seemingly growing, number of Republican and politically conservative interests are advancing climate change policy options they say are consistent with their and their colleagues’ political ideologies and economic principles.

The R Street Initiative, in Washington, D.C., for instance, a Heartland Institute insurance spin-off started by a proudly conservative Republican, wants fellow conservatives to “take a page from the liberal playbook and use the climate change issue to push policies they favor anyway.” The group’s Eli Lehrer is pushing a [free-market proposal](#) involving a revenue-neutral carbon tax that would be offset by cuts in other taxes. The approach would seek to boost alternative energy supplies, including nuclear power, and would support fracking...but it abandons conservative Republicans’ long-held arguments on underlying climate science evidence.

Or take another example, that of former Congressman Bob Inglis, who says his metamorphosis on climate change began in 2004.

Inglis then was a three-term conservative Republican representing a South Carolina district in the U.S. Congress. His was widely considered a “safe” seat for his party and for his own re-election.

His son, a first-time-voter, approached him and said, “I’ll vote for you, Dad, but you are going to have to clean up your act on the environment,” Inglis recalled in a telephone interview.

Like his fellow conservative Republicans at the time, Inglis hadn't supported measures to address climate change. But now he had to respond to this "new constituency," which included not only his son but his four daughters and his wife.

Two trips to Antarctica, in 2006 and 2008, allowed him to observe first-hand what he says was conclusive proof of the impact of fossil fuels on global warming. In 2009, he introduced the Raise Wages, Cut Carbon Act. It would have imposed a tax on carbon while reducing Social Security payroll taxes.

Inglis says that action was largely responsible for his resounding 71 to 29 percent defeat in the Republican primary a year later, ending his 12-year stint in Congress.

"The most enduring heresy was saying that climate change was real, and let's do something about it. It is contrary to the tribe's very important orthodoxy at the moment," he said.

A Carbon Tax Even Conservative Republicans Can Like

That defeat only strengthened Inglis' resolve to push for climate change action. In 2012, he founded The Energy and Enterprise Initiative as an affiliate of George Mason University. He speaks often at locations around the country in an effort to garner support among conservative Republicans for a carbon tax.

Inglis is part of a small but growing base of conservative Republicans trying to take a lead in addressing climate change and bring fellow conservative Republicans on board.

Inglis can point to public attitudes survey work indicating that a majority of Republicans understand that climate change is happening and that the U.S. should take steps to address it, with only about one-third supporting the Republican congressional leaders on the issue. In addition, a number of conservative Republicans worry that their party will pay politically at the voting booth if they continue to be seen as steadfast obstacles to meaningful action. The challenge, they say, lies in wooing conservative Republicans with an approach that doesn't smack of big government or of higher taxes.

Inglis backs a free enterprise approach that eliminates subsidies for all energy sources and attaches costs through an upstream carbon tax. There would also be a dollar-for-dollar cut in existing income taxes.

He says he has succeeded in recruiting conservative Republican "thought leaders" to his cause, including Art Laffer, who was on President Ronald Reagan's Economic Policy Board, and Greg Mankiw, a Harvard economics professor, former chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors under George W. Bush and an economic advisor to Mitt Romney's Presidential campaign. Students at college Republican clubs, business schools, and law schools are also among his target constituencies.



Inglis says finding climate change real is counter to GOP 'tribe's orthodoxy' for now.

Inglis says the action is not in Washington, D.C. at this point, but in the heartland. “We’ve got to build support so elected officials can feel comfortable leading.” Inglis says. His proposal would be introduced in the context of tax reform, but Inglis doesn’t expect to see legislative action until at least 2015.

Carbon Tax: Better for Economy than for Climate?

As for the upstart R Street Institute, Eli Lehrer, the group’s president, says the group’s motivations aren’t purely environmental: he thinks a carbon tax will benefit the economy more than it will help the environment.

Currently, “desirable” matters like income, wages, profits, and investment returns are taxed. Instead, R Street favors shifting the tax code “away from what we want more of to what we want less of.” Carbon, Lehrer says, is the perfect vehicle. He argues the biggest impacts will be to stimulate the economy — as taxes are cut on productive activity — rather than to reduce carbon emissions. He believes that economic impact will have greater appeal among Republicans, especially since specific future impacts of climate change remain uncertain.

“Policies that increase likely future wealth are the best. A carbon tax will do that and reduce CO₂ emissions as a bonus,” Ike Brannon, R Street’s director of research, said in a telephone interview. Brannon says a carbon tax provides an ideal new source of revenue that could be considered in the context of corporate tax reform. Such an approach “is a message that resonates” with conservative interests, he said. An R Street colleague, Andrew Moylan, said in a telephone interview that while no Republican legislator is willing to immediately and publicly support the idea, “we’ve found many areas of common ground you wouldn’t expect.”

“When you drill down past the rhetoric, a lot of people concede a consumption-based tax could make sense” and would be consistent with conservative principles, Brannon said. “Unfortunately, no one is [yet] willing to carry the torch.”

(Even long-time climate science “dissenter” Ross McKittrick, an economics professor at the University of Guelph in Ontario, has shown some movement: In [a June 2013 report](#) for the U.K.-based “Global Warming Policy Foundation,” itself a long-time “skeptic,” McKittrick outlines what he calls an alternative “evidence-based approach” to taxing CO₂ emissions. He would do so by linking the tax rate to “actual evidence of the extent of global warming” — the higher global temperatures rise, the higher the tax rate. If they remain low or stagnant...so too does the tax rate.)

Climate Change Through a National Security Lens

Former Republican Senator John Warner, of Virginia, says it’s premature to expect congressional Republicans to come on board.

“This issue is not going to get cooked and put on the stove in Washington until the fires start burning at home. Constituents have got to urge their members to address this issue” before Congress will revisit this question of climate, he said in a telephone interview.

A former Secretary of the Navy who served on the Senate Armed Services Committee for 30 years and on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee for 23 years, Warner now is a senior advisor for The Pew Project on National Security, Energy and Climate Change, where he focuses on how reliance on fossil fuels endangers the nation’s energy security.



Former U.S. Senator John Warner says pressure from constituents key to action in Congress on climate.

He said after leaving the Senate in 2009 that he wanted to remain involved with energy and security issues. He travels for Pew speaking at town hall meetings with three- and four-star retired officers, discussing how energy and national security are linked.

“We’re focused on telling a slightly different story,” said Phyllis Cuttino, director of the Pew program. “When you have a four-star general and Warner talking about what they see from their perspective as national security experts and what they think the risks are, that’s a new way of looking at an issue.” And, she hopes, a compelling one. It’s another approach designed to appeal to the Republican and conservative ideology, especially with Warner as a spokesman, someone not perceived as being a “huge tree hugger,” Cuttino said.

Still, Warner is realistic, acknowledging that backing a tax will be a tough sell on Capitol Hill unless and until constituents at home apply pressure to their elective leaders.

Highlighting the ‘Conserve’ in Conservative

ConservAmerica, formerly Republicans for Environmental Protection, argues that climate protection is consistent with conservative philosophy. Rob Sisson, the group’s president, in a telephone interview called the work of R Street and Inglis “an intelligent way to approach fiscal and tax policy.” He says it represents a way for Republicans to support action on climate change without having to directly acknowledge it as a problem. ConservAmerica isn’t spearheading a singular solution, but instead is focused on reaching out at the grassroots level to create an environment that encourages Republicans, and conservatives in particular, to take on the issue.

“We’re trying to demonstrate to elected members that there are tens of thousands of Republicans in each state that care about clean energy and climate and would like to see our party take ownership and lead on the matter,” Sisson said. He points to polling indicating that climate change and clean energy are priority concerns for the under-30 demographic: “It will be very difficult to win a national election in 2016 unless the Republican party has some sort of

reasonable position on climate change,” Sisson said. They’ll need a “good conservative route to address it.”

Conservative Religious Groups: Taking Back the ‘Liberal Agenda’

In addition to conservative political and policy interests, some conservative religious groups are also getting more active in pushing for action on climate change.

“The message around climate change got usurped” to be part of what he calls the liberal agenda, Mitch Hescoc, president and CEO of the Evangelical Environmental Network, said in a telephone interview. “We’ve been successful in redefining that message to reach conservative values.”

His group, which supports a carbon tax, has held a series of roundtables to reframe the message so the focus is on the adverse public health impacts — to those born and yet to be born — and potential risks to future generations. Hescoc said that many conservatives in Congress understand that action on climate change is necessary, but “they need to know they have support in their districts to overcome conservative challenges.” He says his group seeks to develop grassroots evangelical support to “help to get more conservative policy leaders to stand up and make a difference.” However, Hescoc acknowledges too that it remains an up-hill battle, with many evangelicals still maintaining that no climate change is occurring, and certainly not as a result of human actions.



Hescoc seeks to redefine climate message to appeal to conservatives.

In a separate action, a group of some 200 scientists, working with a group named [Sojourners](#) on June 9 released [a letter to congressional leaders](#) cautioning that “All of God’s Creation — humans and our environment — is groaning under the weight of our uncontrolled use of fossil fuels, bringing on a warming planet, melting ice, and rising seas.” The scientists in that letter pleaded that Senate and House leaders and members “lead on this issue and enact policies this year that will protect our climate.”

Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, launched in 2012, meanwhile has been visiting college campuses urging student action on climate change. The group seeks to mobilize young evangelicals to tackle the climate crisis, support church leaders in making climate action a priority, and hold elected officials accountable for sound, responsible environmental and climate policies that will help the poor and those unjustly harmed by climate change impacts.

“We want elected officials to know that there are those of us out there who view this issue as one we consider in deciding who to vote for and who to support,” Ben Lowe, the group’s spokesman, said in a telephone interview.

Congressional Republican Opposition Seen Steadfast

It's still considered highly unlikely that the increased efforts will lead to actual legislation over the short term. And conservative interests' and liberal and progressive adversaries do not appear to be sitting-back waiting for a widespread Inglis-type "metamorphosis."

Activist Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign, for instance, notes the difficulty in finding a Republican Senator or House member in a key position who is not what he considers to be a right-wing extremist on climate.

Inglis, "as smart and thoughtful as he is, doesn't represent the current crop of Republicans in Congress, and they lack the vision, scientific integrity, and good sense to follow his lead," Becker said in a telephone interview. He applauds Inglis for floating a carbon tax, but says he doubts there will be any legislative climate change action in the near term. "Republicans have taken a pledge of ignorance on global warming," Becker said.

That's a view shared by Sherwood Boehlert, a New York Republican who served 24 years in Congress until his retirement in 2006. Now Vice Chair of the Board of the League of Conservation Voters, Boehlert points to "a strong movement afoot to deny what science leads us to conclude." He accompanied Inglis to Antarctica and supports his idea but says, "I'm not optimistic that conservative Republicans will come on board."

Indeed, in January, U.S. Senator David Vitter (R-LA) introduced a resolution, that drew 19 Republican co-sponsors, opposing a carbon tax as detrimental to the economy. The same resolution introduced in the House by Congressman Steve Scalise (R-LA) drew 138 Republican co-sponsors.

Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), ranking minority member on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, calls Inglis "one of the most creative thinkers on climate on the Republican side." Waxman agrees with the idea of putting a price on carbon, and says, "I hope that his efforts to persuade his party are successful."

But that doesn't mean Waxman is optimistic about another "metamorphosis." "Unfortunately, the Republicans in Congress have a terrible record," he said, voting repeatedly to block action or deny climate change science.

"There is no doubt in my mind that the Republican position in Congress on climate will ultimately have to change," Waxman says, leaving open the issue of timing. "The only question is whether they will change soon enough to avoid catastrophic impacts."

For his part, Inglis remains the optimist, confident that conservative Republicans will be able to rally around what he considers his bedrock-conservative plan.

"Eventually conservatives will realize just how powerful they are on energy and climate and how essential they are to the solution," Inglis says. "They'll rise to the occasion because they'll come to realize that the world is waiting for us to solve this."

Another metamorphosis? And one sweeping up more than just a single defeated legislator whose climate toe in the water proved a scald? Lots of people will be watching for just such a development among legislators, some hoping for it and others hoping to avoid it. And in the meantime, the federal government action on climate change is likely to come more from President Obama's Executive branch, as clearly indicated in the President's June 25 climate policy announcements. And much of the other "real action" on climate policies is likely to continue coming from state and local efforts and from some private sector corporate initiatives.