



Washington's Changing Climate

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What is life like on “the Hill” this year? Probably the best answer I can give is “two PowerBars, a bag of nuts, and a leftover muffin”—none of which has been supplied by lobbyists. It has been so busy and unpredictable that even eating cannot be taken for granted! On the geopolitical scale, the 2006 elections were a major tectonic event that reshaped the political landscape, and the aftershocks are still being felt. The new political morphology has yet to be fully characterized, but one rapidly expanding hotspot is the climate change debate. The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee of the previous Congress (109th) held hearings on climate change in which the star witness was Michael Crichton, a climate skeptic best known for writing science fiction. The list of potential witnesses for the new 110th Congress includes such established leaders as Al Gore, former World Bank chief economist Sir Nicholas Stern, and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. In the case of Governor Schwarzenegger, I find it interesting that life may imitate art, with the Terminator warning us of the potentially catastrophic implications of our actions.

As important as the 2006 elections have been in reshaping the debate on this issue, they are only one factor among many. Like physical landscapes, political landscapes are the result of numerous interlocking forces. The climate change debate has been shaped by the efforts of many people over many years—all of it building political pressure to take action. Recently, the pressure to act has become overwhelming. The combination of forces, including the Stern Review; the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report; the film *An Inconvenient Truth*; California’s commitment to reduce its overall greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020; the coalition of northeastern states’ adoption of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI), in which they agreed to work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from electric utilities; and the U.S. Climate Action Partnership (USCAP), through which major corporations recently announced support for mandatory climate change legislation, have fundamentally altered the structure of the climate change debate. Aside from a small minority of hardcore skeptics, officials in Washington are no longer debating whether climate change is real or whether human activities are the primary cause. The debate has shifted to the question of what we can do that is effective, pragmatic, and economically sustainable in the context of a changing climate. This tough question has inspired vigorous debate.

I’m grateful that GSA has provided me with the unique opportunity to participate in this debate. As a legislative fellow in the office of California Senator Dianne Feinstein, I am helping to craft a sector-by-sector approach that has economy-wide coverage. This approach includes five bills: utility sector cap and trade, industrial sector cap and trade, improving fuel economy standards, promoting low-carbon fuels, and improving energy efficiency. The utility bill (S.317), introduced by Senator Feinstein and Delaware Senator Tom Carper, is supported by six leading electric utility companies. To me, this endorsement demonstrates that America is ready to act—if only our political leaders will join us.

Many different approaches to climate change are being considered in the Senate, and nobody knows what will come out of committee hearings—or what can pass on the Senate floor. The yet-to-be-determined bill that emerges will likely reflect

the general principles of the USCAP “Call for Action” and be somewhere between what California and RGGI have adopted. The consensus seems to be that such a bill would face an uphill battle in the Senate, where 60 votes are needed to avoid filibuster.

Climate change issues are only part of what I am working with and learning about during my fellowship. Another lesson I’ve learned is that policy is as different from science as the Hadean is from the Cenozoic. Policy is about discovering how to resolve the differences between what people believe, and some policy makers’ definition of science can be described as “what the science community believes.” Communicating effectively with policy makers requires that we accept science as only one of many considerations, and often not as the most important one to politicians. It also helps to remember that the public rarely forgets the times when scientists have “gotten it wrong” and may be suspicious that the science isn’t correct this time either. Communicating with policy makers requires a fair amount of humility, a skill I’m still learning. Practice helps, which is why I caught myself wondering, “Which has the smallest carbon footprint: the PowerBars, the bag of nuts, or the leftover muffin?”

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