Congressional Perspectives on the Environment and the 2004 Election

Christopher Shays (R-CT)
U.S. House of Representatives

February 19, 2004

I want to talk with you about leadership and the need – the absolute, imperative need – for environmental action. I honestly believe that the environment is one of the most important concerns I have as a member of Congress. We’re not going to have a world to live in if we continue our neglectful ways. I believe that with all my heart and soul.

ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP

Among environmental groups, Congress, and this administration, sadly, there is little effort to resolve what we can agree on, no real effort to resolve what divides us, and no apparent effort to participate in leading a world desperate to be led. Led not by the dictates of a powerful nation, but led by the most effective kind of leadership – the kind that listens, learns, helps, and leads – and then listens again.

It’s easy for us to be good environmentalists without being good leaders. It’s also easy for us to be critical of the Bush administration. Clear Skies, Healthy Forests, the Artic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), and our lack of movement on climate change are all examples of poor environmental policy. But when we are critical without creating a vision that others can buy into, we aren’t leading.

In times like these, the question is not which policies we should follow. In many cases, such as in the Clean Air Act, the right policy is already in place. We know what it is, and we need to work to defend its strength as one of the seminal environmental laws of all time – a law that the rest of the world uses as an example of how to do environmental legislation right. At times like these, the question is how. How do we keep the progress that we have worked so hard to accomplish? How do we move the ball forward on crucial policies like increased Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards and effective clean air policy?
I believe the environmental community has a responsibility to move beyond itself and reach out to new constituencies – to build a grand coalition that shares a vision for an improved environment. The environmental community has much strength; it hangs together quite well. But there is reticence to concede on any issue because one part of the community doesn’t want to sell out another. This is an important strength – and there are certainly some issues, such as ANWR, that should never be compromised away. But this “hanging together” can end up being like “circling the wagons.” It can be defensive, and not terribly effective, in finding new strength to move forward.

Environmentalists need to reach out to industry, truly. We should also be reaching out to churches, ranchers, fishermen and so many others. I think that right now some environmentalists may see industry as an opportunity for fundraising rather than understanding that corporate interests can be important allies. Environmentalists need to reach beyond the Democratic Caucus and the very few of us Republicans who are within a certain “comfort level.” Cooperation between the parties has almost disappeared for many reasons, but success in the past has come when there are substantial numbers on both sides of the aisle who want environmental progress.

The Republican Party, believe it or not, is not the enemy. We have to rebuild the coalition – we have to rebuild the bipartisan base. Vision and leadership is how that is accomplished. And if we fail, even if we fail in certain cases, we will be stronger for trying. Casting aside our assumptions and our day-to-day methods, we have an opportunity to define a new leadership on the environment. We can act together for lasting change to ensure that our world is cleaner for generations that will exist well beyond our own horizons.
We must look back on this time at which we saw that we are the key – that we, each of us, must act with all our strength to be leaders. I think we must do it now because the stakes could not be higher.

When I talk about leaders, I’m talking about every individual in this room. Sometimes it takes leadership to speak out in a class about something you’re hearing that you just don’t agree with. I had no qualms about standing up to the Clinton administration when they engaged in environmentally damaging policy, like their unbelievable support of the extremely destructive mountaintop coal-mining practice in West Virginia. And I do not hesitate to express my environmental views to the Bush administration either. In fact, I have met with Paula Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs, and Jim Connaughton of the Council on Environmental Quality, to discuss what I believe to be an absolute failure on the part of the Bush administration to involve environmentalists and Republican moderates in the formation of sound environmental policy. I asked them: Why do they seem to take so much joy in ticking off the environmental community?

The Bush administration is masterful at framing its message on the environment with good titles like the “Clear Skies,” and “Healthy Forests”.

**But the truth is that many of the initiatives proposed by the White House exacerbate, rather than improve, the problems they target. This dichotomy of rhetoric and reality was clear throughout our debate on the energy bill, as well as in discussions of the Healthy Forests initiative and the Clear Skies initiative. In my mind, all three represent extraordinary missed opportunities to advance forward-looking, environmentally progressive legislation.**

This reality highlights the challenge we face: Without new leadership on the environment, the potential for policy that melds the objectives of public interests, environmentalists, and industry is lost.
ENERGY POLICY

For decades, our country has lacked a national environmental policy. This year, we had an incredible chance to devise a forward-looking energy policy that would have increased fuel efficiency, provided incentives to make renewable energy more affordable and widely available, made polluters, including the producers of MTBE (Methyl Tertiary Butyl Ether), pay for harming our environment, and advanced a renewable portfolio standard. Instead, we got quite a bad bill, which makes fiscally irresponsible and environmentally reckless decisions for the benefit of a few very profitable industries that don’t need this kind of help from taxpayers.

The Bush administration framed the Energy Policy Act as a way to modernize energy production and distribution systems, promote conservation and environmentally sound production and new technologies, strengthen our economy and create new jobs, and reduce America’s dependency on foreign oil. Back in November, however, my colleagues in the House passed a conference report for the Energy Policy Act that includes nearly $23 billion in tax breaks to promote greater use of coal power plants, to renew interest in nuclear power, to encourage oil companies to drill in deep waters in the Gulf of Mexico, and to expand the generation of power through wind, among other things.

This bill includes $11.9 billion in incentives for the oil and gas industry. It includes no requirement for electricity producers to increase their use of renewable fuels. It includes no new CAFE standards to reduce petroleum consumption. That part absolutely blows me away. It includes liability immunity for MTBE producers and a repeal of the Public Utility Holding Company Act – long a mainstay of consumer protection in the utility industry, limiting mergers between utility-holding companies.

What should have been a comprehensive energy policy that strengthened our energy independence, while promoting efficiency and renewable energy development, became a very robust grab bag that environmentalists had no choice but to oppose.
Although the Energy Policy Act has lost steam a bit since passing the House on November 18, it serves as a powerful example of what can happen without the new, coherent environmental leadership I mentioned.

**“Healthy” Forests**

Another example of environmental policy gone wrong was the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which was signed into law December 3, 2003. I opposed the bill because I believe that focusing Forest Service personnel on active forest restoration efforts rather than managing timber sales would have offered lasting effective benefits to all who enjoy our national forests. The administration argues that the bill would reduce the threat of destructive wildfires while upholding environmental standards and encouraging early public input in the review and planning process. They argue that the bill would strengthen public participation in developing high-priority forest-health projects, reduce the complexity of environmental analysis, allow federal agencies to use the best science available to actively manage land under their protection, and provide a more effective appeals process by encouraging early public participation in project planning.

In actuality, this legislation weakens important environmental protections. You’ll see more logging and more road building. It does not sufficiently target our limited resources to protect vulnerable homes and communities from forest fires and fails to protect pristine roadless areas and fire-resistant, old-growth trees.

Instead of giving priority to areas where population centers and forests intersect, the Healthy Forest Restoration Act attempts to reduce forest fires by weakening environmental protections and increasing logging on federal public lands far from people and their property. This is simply the wrong approach to forest protection, and its impacts will have drastic consequences for public lands.
The Clear Skies Initiative is another good example of environmental policy that is well marketed but just does not go far enough to fix the problem — and in some cases goes backwards. I believe the threat from global warming is very real. We must act now to combat potentially catastrophic climate change, but the Bush administration’s Clear Skies Initiative does not include regulation on the number one greenhouse gas: carbon dioxide.

The Clear Skies Initiative is modeled on the cap-and-trade provisions of the 1990 Clear Air Act acid rain program — a program that worked. On Feb. 27, 2003, Congressman Joe Barton (R-TX) introduced H.R. 999 and Senator Inhofe (R-OK) introduced S. 485 — the Clear Skies Act. The bill is the legislative reality of President Bush’s Clear Skies Initiative. Instead of responding to the challenge of devising a clean air policy that will dramatically improve dirty power-plant emissions in a comprehensive way, while complying with market restraints, responding to environmental projections, and reflecting public health concerns — the Clear Skies Initiative creates a mandatory program to reduce power-plant emissions of sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, and mercury by setting national caps on each pollutant. But it does not regulate carbon dioxide, and the bill weakens protections that exist in current law regarding power plant emissions of mercury.

I’m an original co-sponsor of legislation, introduced by Congressmen Obey (D-WI) and Congressman Gilchrest (R-MD) that mirrors the Climate Stewardship Act (S. 139), which was introduced by Senators McCain and Lieberman in the Senate. S. 139 was defeated in the Senate by a vote of 55 to 43 in October 2003. I believe this bill would have taken a responsible first step toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions in a way that's timely, meaningful, and cost-effective. I have hope that our House bill will be more successful.

The Climate Stewardship Act regulates emissions from the electricity generation, transportation, industrial, and commercial economic sectors, which together account for 85 percent of the overall U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. It achieves reduction goals by allowing trading of emissions allowances on the open market, supported by a government inventory of emissions and emissions reductions for individual companies and utilities.
The bottom line is: to achieve real progress on clean air policy, we need to regulate carbon dioxide emissions, and we need to advance a package that has the support not only of Republicans and Democrats, but of environmentalists and industry as well.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by making these points. When Abraham Lincoln went to Gettysburg, he expected to lose the next election. Things had not been going well for him or our country. The nation had broken apart. Thousands and thousands of Americans were dying each month — on average, over 5,000 soldiers and almost an equal number of civilians — for four years, in a nation with a population of 30 million people. President Lincoln's Cabinet was filled with appointees who believed they should be president. Those of power, industry and wealth thought Lincoln an incompetent fool and were working to replace him. So here he was, going to Gettysburg, with the opportunity to exploit a victory, rally the North against the South, and improve his electoral chances. Carl Sandburg tells us, “Lincoln's words at Gettysburg were sacred — yet strange and familiar.”

This is part of what Lincoln said: “We cannot consecrate — we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men . . . “ Now you’re saying to yourselves, “Where the hell is he going with this?” Listen to what he said: “We cannot consecrate — we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far beyond our poor power to add or detract.” Those words meant something to me — and meant a lot more when I saw it from Sandburg’s perspective. Sandburg points out that Lincoln could have said “the brave Union men.” And then he asks, “Did he have a purpose in omitting the word Union? Was he keeping himself and his utterances clear of the passion that would not be good to look back on when the time came for peace and reconciliation? Did he mean to leave an implication that there were brave Union men and brave Confederate men, living and dead, who struggled here?”
Now this is my point: The politician in me marvels at these questions. I hunger for this kind of strength of character and leadership in my leaders that Lincoln showed continually during his presidency.

As some of our brave soldiers come home draped in heroes’ flags, and continue to die in Iraq – for a cause I believe they deeply believe in – I wonder what is being asked of me and you during these troubled times. What sacrifices should we be making to help win the peace in Iraq and the war against terrorism? What is being asked of you and me as we live our relatively carefree lives in a world that is not so carefree? I don’t know about you, but I want my president and my Congressional leaders to ask more of us. Like Lincoln, I want them to care more about what history will say of us, rather than what we will say of ourselves.

The War Between the States ultimately resulted in the end of slavery. But looking back, we wonder how people could own slaves. David McCullough, another writer and historian, looks at this issue and then asks us to look at ourselves. In an interview in Forbes magazine in 1998, McCullough points out, “We will probably never be able to comprehend how honest, kind, Bible-reading, decent Americans could actually own people. How could they have had slavery? What was on their minds? What was wrong with them?”

But McCullough tells us, “You can be sure that someday, people are going to look back at us and say: ‘What in the world were they thinking about? What kind of blinders were they wearing?’” “It’s anyone’s guess what will be,” he says. Then McCullough goes on to say, “I suspect that they will say of what we are doing to the environment, ‘Look what they did. Had they no sense at the time? No sense of responsibility? Look at what they did.’”

I know we have made significant strides over the years to protect our air, water, and habitat. But I believe that David McCullough is right. History will not be kind to us. And believe me, they won’t be any kinder to environmentalists. Failing to change our neglectful ways seems unthinkable. While I have to believe we will wake up and
change, I wonder: Will we act soon enough so that the cure does not kill the patient?

What’s alarming is that few people seem to care. What’s surprising is that few people seem to know they should care. But that’s also our hope. They just don’t know.

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It’s time for the environmental community to move beyond itself. We have an absolute responsibility to work together to forge a coalition that shares a vision for an improved environment.

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**Q & A**

**Q:** Were does your environmental ethic come from?

**A:** When I was in high school, Rachel Carson was writing *Silent Spring* and it was new. The word environment was new to me then, but when I went off college they started an environmental program. That was a new concept – it’s almost laughable now to think that was the case. So in my formative years, I was exposed to this issue.

In 1974 I was a state legislator, and I began to focus on various issues. I tell people that being in the legislature is like going to a large university like Yale, where you are told to take a lot of different courses and get a passing grade in every one. You have to know a little about so many things. At any rate, I was exposed to it at a point when people were waking up to it, exposed to it as a legislator in the early 1970s when this movement was really strong, and I also have a daughter who has religion on this issue.

When we went to vote on the energy bill, my daughter came up to me and said, “Dad, I want to know what your position is on ANWR.” I said, “Well, I don’t want to mine ANWR.” And the next day she gave me a paper she wanted me to read about the devastation that had occurred there already. I took the paper and had no intention of reading it. The next day she asked me if I’d read it and I said “No”. The next day she asked me if I’d read it, and I said “No.” Finally, I had to read it. The next day she asked me if I had read it and I said, “Yes,” and walked away. She said, “What did you think?” So I stood up a little bit
and said, “Sweetie, someday you’re going to realize that when you’ve made a sale, you just take the sale.” And she said, “Dad, I know that’s your argument, but the problem is that you don’t believe passionately enough about the issue.” She didn’t just want the sale. She wanted my passion. Well, she got my passion. I ended up speaking on the floor of the House against it. I just wanted to tell this story to make a point. You sometimes need a little shove to do the right thing.

Q: Why do you think the White House thinks it’s good politics to attack the environmental community or environmental causes?

A: The White House thinks that the environmental movement is a Democratic movement, and even if Republicans walked on water, they wouldn’t get the support of the environmental movement. What surprises me is that, even if they’re right in the short run, they’re dead wrong in the long run.

When I spoke to the President about this issue – and I don’t want to give the impression that I speak to him every day, but when you have those moments you take advantage of them, and flying on an airplane with the President is one of those moments – on the airplane, I asked the President why he didn’t improve the CAFE standards. His response was that he believes the market is going to move people in that direction.

At his ranch in Texas, he collects the water, he recycles wastewater, he heats and cools his home from ground temperature from piping in the ground, and he thinks he practices what he preaches. And to him that speaks more than laws. So, in his mind he believes that he is a strong environmentalist. He’s never been given that recognition by the environmental movement and so he doesn’t see why he should work with them.