

The Need for Bold Leadership

Long-term vision and understanding paired with short-term pragmatism will create successful leadership

by George J. Mitchell

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As President-elect Barack Obama assesses the current state of environmental law and policy, he will face two large challenges: (1) legislative gridlock that has blocked action on a wide range of environmental issues for too many years; and (2) the daunting but important task of addressing global climate change. The key to meeting both of these challenges successfully is bold leadership.

The leadership needed to meet these two challenges requires two different but complementary attributes. First, he will require a vision and understanding of what is needed for current and future generations. Second, he will need a sensitivity and appreciation for what can be accomplished in the short term to create and start us on the path to long-term solutions.

In recent years, the media, interest groups, and some politicians have stressed partisan differences on environmental law and policy. To be sure, there are important differences between the parties on these issues. However, it is important to remember that local or regional differences, often unrelated to political parties, can lead to legislative gridlock that is just as difficult to untangle. Environmental law and policy have a long history and tradition of bipartisan cooperation and leadership. If we can honor and repeat that history and tradition, it will serve us well.

One of the lessons I learned from my years in the U.S. Senate was the importance of making legislative adjustments and accommodations to ensure progress without sacrificing important principles and goals. The phrase my colleagues and I often used was: "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good."

That didn't mean we backed away from vigorous debate or tough votes, but it did mean that there were times when we and those on the other side of the debate were willing to negotiate in good faith, find common ground, and make accommodations to avoid gridlock. On occasion, we incurred the wrath of nongovernmental advocates who were pressing for more aggressive legislation. More often than not, our "allies turned critics" eventually came to appreciate our judgment that some progress was better than no progress and continued gridlock.

The threat of global climate change is an enormous problem that demands presidential attention and bold leadership. The

problem is usually presented as an issue of environmental law and policy. However, the problem and the solution—moving to a low-carbon future—go far beyond questions of environmental policy. Significant environmental, economic, and international security issues come together under the umbrella of climate change.

As the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, has noted: "Many of the challenges we face, from poverty to armed conflict, are linked to the effect of global warming." Reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and others explain how global warming could lead to conflicts over land and water, to environmental refugees, and to failed states in already vulnerable parts of the world.

The reports warn that hundreds of millions of people could be forced from their homes because of rising sea levels, floods, and more intense drought—creating large numbers of climate refugees searching for safe places to live. The reports also warn that over one-half billion people could be affected by malnutrition, and almost two billion people could be without enough water. These effects could be the result of many factors, including uncontrolled climate change.

If we fail to change course, the implications for world peace and stability are profound. The stakes are high, but there is reason for optimism. After years of halting progress, public opinion has finally reached a tipping point. People the world over are ready to move forward toward clear, bold goals. With the Kyoto Protocol set to expire at the end of 2012, governments from around the world met in Bali last year. More than 190 countries, including China, India, and the United States, agreed to a process known as the Bali Action Plan. The goal is to have a new, post-Kyoto agreement ready for signature at a meeting in Copenhagen in 2009.

Moving to a low-carbon future will not happen in a timely manner if the United States continues to rely solely on voluntary measures. While divisions remain, I am convinced that most Americans want our country to be a leader, not a laggard, in dealing with this issue.

The United States is responsible for a significant portion of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions on both an absolute and a per capita basis. So we have a responsibility to address the issue.

Some opponents of action contend that moving to a low-carbon future will impose significant, unacceptable costs on consumers and business interests. The spectre of additional costs needs to be assessed fairly and thoroughly, particularly during these tight economic times, with energy costs already creating a burden for most American families and businesses. Appropriate legislation should include measures to address direct or indirect costs of compliance.

Meeting the challenge of climate change will require the public and private investment of time, energy, and money, as well as tough new regulatory measures, ingenuity, and an entrepreneurial spirit.

Fortunately, a large number of business leaders recognize that climate change presents a business opportunity. Some companies have promising new technologies that will reduce GHG emissions and will be in demand across the globe. Some have come to the realization that they can save money and improve their bottom lines by using less energy and conserving resources.

For many people, in addition to the environmental, economic, and international security reasons to act, addressing climate change is a moral imperative—a matter of deeply held personal values about protecting the earth and passing on to our children a world better than the one we inherited.

During the long campaign season, our new president expressed support for creation of a new, mandatory program to address climate change. Meeting the challenge of global climate change will require that he work with congressional leaders to untangle the legislative gridlock that has blocked action on a wide range of environmental issues and, at the same time, enact a climate change program that starts us on the path to addressing one of the most significant environmental, economic, and international security issues of our time.

I am confident that the president will meet these challenges. With the right kind of leadership, the United States will be reducing its own GHG emissions soon and playing a more constructive role in the effort to create a new, post-Kyoto international agreement in 2009.