

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Time to Wake Up

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

**Sheldon Whitehouse, Ted Widmer**

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning, everyone. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you for starting this part of your morning with us.

Our guest speaker is the two-term senator from Rhode Island Sheldon Whitehouse. His reputation for introducing legislation showing that the planet is warming, and for not being afraid to call out his Senate colleagues who deny the problem exists has earned him recognition for being Congress's climate change champion. It is an honor to welcome you to the Public Affairs breakfast program.

Also on the podium is Ted Widmer, one of our senior fellows here at the Council. Ted has graciously agreed to engage Senator Whitehouse in conversation about climate change. This is a perfect match, for not only is Ted from Rhode Island, writing a book on climate change, but he is no stranger to Washington, as he was a foreign policy speechwriter and senior advisor to [President Bill Clinton](#).

You all should have received copies of their bios and have read them. If you haven't, please do because you'll know what interesting paths their careers have taken them.

Last year was a landmark year for climate change. It marked both the [warmest year on record](#) and the advent of a new climate pact, demonstrating unprecedented global cooperation. The [Paris Agreement](#), as it is known, has now been signed by 174 countries, including the United States.

Though most Americans accept that the Earth is warming, they are split along party lines in disagreement as to whether humans are the cause and whether policy responses are warranted. This issue has become one of the most polarizing subjects in American politics, and it has also been one that Congress has been inclined to avoid. But this hasn't deterred Senator Whitehouse. Believing that this issue is too important to ignore, he has said that as long as the atmosphere continues to warm, ice continues to melt, seas rise and acidify, he has promised to talk about climate change. Firing up his Senate colleagues is exactly what he has been doing. Frustrated by the Senate's apparent avoidance of the issue, our guest has risen each week on the Senate floor, [more than 135 times](#), to alert his colleagues to what is happening to planet Earth.

In the next 30 minutes or so, Ted will have a conversation with the senator about climate change, addressing such issues as what the United States is doing to meet its pledges to the Paris Agreement and whether in this feisty [presidential election](#) season political struggles are threatening progress.

Please join me in welcoming both of our speakers today, Senator Whitehouse and Ted Widmer.

## Conversation

**TED WIDMER:** Thank you, Joanne.

I just want to begin by saying that Rhode Island is a small enough state that you can actually get to know your senator. It is the way the [founders](#) designed our system to work; it doesn't often work that well. But in Rhode Island it can, and it does. In our case, I've known the senator since he ran in 2006. I was a volunteer for him then. We're all so proud of him. As Joanne mentioned, his [standing up every week on this issue](#)—he's standing up for Rhode Islanders, but for a lot of other people too because this is one of the great issues of our time.

Today he has a [letter](#) published in *The New York Times* on money and climate change. I think today we'll talk not only about the science of what is happening, but it's a political crisis as well in which not much is happening in the U.S. Senate.

Maybe we could just begin with your insider's view of what's it like standing up and talking about climate change once a week and having to deal with [senators](#) coming and [holding snowballs](#) in rebuttal.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Well, the rebuttal has more or less stopped. I think the Republicans are now at a stage where they would prefer to run from this issue than engage on it, because they understand that this is not one that helps them. That has been a bit of a change, because the more ardent deniers were unhesitant about coming out earlier on. But I think the sense has been from the more moderate Republicans: "Shut up. We are tired of hearing this. It is not helping us. Keep it to yourself. This is not good for our brand."

The one thing that I would want to emphasize here is that this is not a true partisan divide. There are somewhere between 12 and 20 Republican senators who would happily work on a good climate bill. It isn't that Republicans believe one thing and Democrats believe another. That's not true in the public. Even Republicans usually accept the reality of climate change. There's a [Tea Party](#) cohort that, for a whole variety of reasons, doesn't. But if you take the Tea Party out, there are even majorities on the Republican side.

What's happened is a very simple piece of political mechanics. That is that [Citizens United](#), that god-awful Supreme Court decision, allowed special interests to spend unlimited amounts of money in politics. It took musketry to Gatling guns. It took rifles to heavy artillery. The group that lives off of Congress more than any other is the fossil fuel industry. They were the quickest to adapt, and they went right to work. So you have groups like [Americans for Prosperity](#), the [Koch brothers'](#) front group, saying, "We're going to spend \$750 million in this election"—and it's a credible threat; they're already through \$450 million and climbing—"And, by the way, if you cross us on climate change"—these are their words—"you're going to be severely disadvantaged and in political peril." You don't have to be a very clever politician to put the \$750 million club next to the political peril threat and realize that maybe you should shut up.

So what's frustrating for me is hearing from those 12 to 20 Republican senators: "Sheldon, I want to be with you. Sheldon, you're doing the right thing. Sheldon, hang in on the climate fee bill; I'll find a way. Sheldon, as soon as I'm through my primary. Sheldon—"—you know, all of that, but not actually willing to take the step.

So really, the story of our failure on climate change is a story of our failure to understand the truly manipulative and evil effects of money in politics. It's being deployed right now. You undo *Citizens*

*United* and you disable those big gun decks of the artillery industry and we will have a bill in a month.

**TED WIDMER:** Is there an equivalent financial pressure on the other side?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** No, nothing like that. The International Monetary Fund is a reasonably intelligent and thoughtful organization. They have put what they call the "effective subsidy" for the fossil fuel industry. That's not just the direct payments for tax benefits and drilling subsidies and things like that. It's the avoided cost of the harms of carbon. They confess that they define effective subsidy very, very broadly. That said, they peg it at north of \$600 billion a year just in the United States alone. So if you're an industry that's on the receiving end of a \$600-billion-plus-per-year subsidy, throwing \$750 million at politics is a laughably small investment to protect your stake. Unless there is some limit on the spending, they have virtually unlimited ROI (return on investment) motivation to spend, spend, spend, spend on politics.

On our side, we have groups like [LCV](#) (League of Conservation Voters) and we have individuals like [Tom Steyer](#), who for [eleemosynary](#) reasons, to try to do the right thing, are paying. But I think, as anybody knows, charitable efforts are very hard to compete and maintain up against a motivated effort that has a huge return on investment for every dollar that gets spent.

**TED WIDMER:** And yet, the science just continues to build a stronger argument every year. Joanne mentioned 2015. But 2016 is already going to be the [hottest year ever](#).

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Every month in the last 12 was the hottest month ever.

**TED WIDMER:** We saw the [forest fires](#). If you're from Rhode Island, there's a distressing adjective that's often used to describe the huge chunks of ice melting in the Arctic and Antarctic, "Rhode Island-sized." [Laughter]

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** We don't like being used as a unit of measure, thank you all very much.

**TED WIDMER:** No.

And there must be a political tipping point coming in which some smart Republican will see that there are enough young voters who really care about this that they will take a stand. We both remember [John Chafee](#), a great Republican senator from Rhode Island, who was very good on the environment, and arguably was the leading environmental senator of his time.

But where is that great moderate Republican senator to come?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Last week was the 30th anniversary of the [Chafee Hearings on Climate Change](#). As a Republican senator, he chaired an Environment Public Works Committee Subcommittee on Environmental Pollution. Imagine nowadays having a Republican EPW that actually had a subcommittee on environmental pollution. Anyway, they had one. He chaired it. They had great hearings. [Al Gore](#) was one of the witnesses, [Michael Oppenheimer](#) was one, [James Hansen](#). And here we are, 30 years later, still, and if you read what John Chafee said, it could be front page of the newspapers today.

There is pressure building on the Republican colleagues. If you are [Kelly Ayotte](#), your state biologist is telling the world that the iconic [New Hampshire moose is in terrible trouble](#) because the moose hasn't developed the capability to groom itself of ticks. What keeps ticks down off of moose is snow cover, and as the snow cover isn't present in New Hampshire, the people who go out on moose tours

are now finding moose that have 20,000, 30,000, 50,000 ticks on them. The young moose are dying because they can't support their own body as well as the 30,000–50,000 ticks that get on them, and they look like brown blueberry bushes and not moose.

There are these local individual situations—the [dying of the Western forest](#) because of the pine beetle and the resulting fires; the [Charleston coast coming up](#) so that stores have to put tape as to where they think the next high tide is going to be; [Miami Beach having to pump out at every high tide](#).

**TED WIDMER:** Right. [Houston had flooding](#).

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Those realities are putting pressure on people.

But there's always another day. That's the problem. There's always another day. If you cross the Koch brothers and ExxonMobil and API (American Petroleum Institute) and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce today, they will punish you today. If you just have one more day go by, you can get away with it for just one more day.

**TED WIDMER:** These senators presumably are tracking the way people think on this issue. That does seem to be changing a lot. Among the young I think the numbers are overwhelmingly on the right side. But among everyone too.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** So there's an avenue, and they do feel the pressure. But look on the other hand at the NRA (National Rifle Association). Their truly focused and determined political operation can keep people from voting on things that have 85–95 percent support in the general public, that have 75 percent support among gun owners. So it's not just a question of popular will. It's a question of somebody who's willing to come and clobber you if you disagree with them and has a really credible threat that they can do so in a very, very big way.

The fossil fuel industry has also infiltrated the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. [Elizabeth Warren](#) and I just did a [report](#) showing how the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's climate policies are not shared by any of their board members. They're just out there with the fossil fuel industry. They have climbed into the Farm Bureau, which is a complete climate-denial operation, which is insane when you consider what farmers are seeing in their fields. Even groups like the National Association of Manufacturers are very anti, and you probably do more manufacturing for solar and wind than you do for oil.

So it's not just that you're going to have the fossil fuel guys coming after you. You'll have the Koch brothers, you'll have the Chamber. They have sort of taken over the business establishment. So they can make pretty *in terrorem* threats—and they do.

**TED WIDMER:** It seems like no one would argue that our foreign policy is strengthened by adhering to climate denial. Canada just [changed its government](#), as everyone knows. This is a foreign policy crowd, but I would submit that being right on this issue is very good for our overall foreign policy. It's an area of really important cooperation with China at a time when we don't cooperate in every field of the relationship. There was just a successful [visit](#) from the prime minister of India, Prime Minister [Modi](#).

Couldn't that be a new tack of an argument, that our relationship with the rest of the world depends heavily on this, on getting right with climate?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** I think it puts us at terrible risk. [Bill Clinton](#) always used to say that the power of our example as Americans has always mattered more in the world than any example of our power.

**TED WIDMER:** That's right.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** He was shortening [Daniel Webster's famous Bunker Hill speech](#), that what the founders left to us was an example, a powerful example in the world; and if at any time the world's experience of our example was that it was failing, then, in Websterian terms, he said, "the knell of popular liberty would sound throughout the world." So this sense that America stands for something and that it matters in the world is a very lasting proposition. What we stand for is that we will do the right thing. We will have [Marshall Plans](#) and [MacArthur Plans](#), and come to the rescue when there are terrible floods and tsunamis and not take advantage of all of that, and that we're a beacon, that our system is a model for others.

Well, when people who are operating at a subsistence level around the world are facing really dramatic changes in the way that they live, and the blame is very obviously upon carbon pollution and we're the top carbon polluter, and we knew about it, and we had a system that tried to respond but couldn't because special-interest money that had such a nefarious, malign influence in it, that the great vaunted democracy of America failed at this very thing that matters so much to you in your village, to you in your barrio, to you in your farm, to you in your native fishery, that's a very deep chasm for the power of our example to fall into.

**TED WIDMER:** On that subject we have a major agreement, an almost unprecedented agreement, the [Paris Agreement](#), that every nation in attendance, basically every nation on Earth, signed, very few have ratified. But what are your feelings about its prospects going forward? It's a time of incredible turbulence here at home. We don't know how the [election](#) is going to go.

[Donald Trump](#) has [called](#) climate change a hoax created by the Chinese. [Laughter] I wonder about him, because he's also a New York City-based developer with a lot of properties on the shoreline. He must know that the seas are rising. In some part of his mind he must know that it's real.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** His companies have actually [filed for seawalls](#) to protect golf courses on grounds of sea level rise and climate change. So he knows. In 2009 there was a [full-page ad](#) taken out in *The New York Times* to urge [Obama](#) a really strong outcome in the [Copenhagen conversations](#), and among the New York business signatories who said, "Climate change is serious, it's real, it's potentially catastrophic, we can't postpone the planet, you've got to do this," were Donald, [Eric](#), and [Ivanka Trump](#).

**TED WIDMER:** Amazing. I didn't know that.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** So he was for it before he was against it.

**TED WIDMER:** So is Paris going to survive our election?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Yes. Paris has immense momentum at this point. To me the most significant part of Paris wasn't just the deal itself, because there's, I think, more to be achieved before we can say "mission accomplished" there. But it's certainly a terrific stage in the rocket launch and with more to come.

Nor is it that 160 countries joined. It's that the corporate community came forth in an enormous way,



very powerfully, to say, "We want a really strong deal." The other dirty secret of what's happening in our politics is that while the fossil fuel guys are in there hammer and tongs beating the hell out of anybody who might cross them on climate change, the rest of the corporate community is totally AWOL (absent without leave)—totally.

I had the Cleantech lobby group come in, which is Apple, Google, and the big tech industry, but it's also a lot of green energy companies. And I had the lumber industry come in. And I had the property/casualty industry, the guys who write the checks when the big terrible storms and floods and so forth happen. They all came in in the same week. So it was kind of a noteworthy week. They all had their list of things that they wanted out of Congress that they were lobbying on. Hard to imagine three sets of interests that should be more attuned to climate change and that had a more direct financial interest in getting something done on climate change—0 for 3 in any interest in climate change, zero. And they don't show up. None of them show up—not Apple, not Google, none of them.

They're starting to show up a tiny bit in the food industry. Ceres and BICEP (Business for Innovative Climate and Energy Policy) is starting to organize people a little bit. There's a Partnership for Responsible Growth that is, among other beautiful things, starting to take ads out on *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page saying what a horrible nonsense position *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page has on climate. So there are tendrils of corporate political support for this.

But if you're, say, [John Boozman](#) in Arkansas, a Republican, if you're going to vote wrong on climate, you know what the fossil fuel guys are going to do. They've told you. The Koch brothers have told you. Walmart is not saying, "John, don't worry about those guys. We've got your back. When they come after you, we'll make sure that you're fine. Stick with it. Do what you want. This is important to us." They're just not saying it.

They're not there. None of them are there. It's not that I'm picking one particular bad guy. Coke and Pepsi are terrific, terrific, terrific on this stuff, but they lobby through the American Beverage Association, which is moribund on climate, and which is a member of the U.S. Chamber board. The U.S. Chambers are in complete climate denial. They're absolutely against anything that might be done. So Coke and Pepsi have these terrific, terrific, terrific policies, but the bulk of their lobbying work runs counter to their policies, just because of the way they do it.

So that's the world that I live in. Somebody who wants to do something good on climate on the Republican side has no friends—none—and their enemies are very fierce and pointing guns right at their heads. And you wonder why nothing happens. It's political hydraulics. As soon as that changes, people will come in. You've got really good Republicans in Congress who want to do this.

**TED WIDMER:** There's a kind of simplistic political argument the right makes a lot, which is that to be effective on climate is job-killing. [Marco Rubio](#) was saying that a lot. Yet, there's a lot of evidence out there that it's job-creating and that GDP can rise as emissions decline. Can we do more to substantiate that and get that good news in solar and wind, obviously? In Rhode Island we're doing a lot with wind. There's a project called [Deepwater Wind](#) that's going into the water now. It's the first successful ocean-based wind turbine system on the Eastern Coast of the United States. It's going to be online in a couple of years.

But can we get the good news business story out there?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Yup. It's coming more and more too. I mean you go to places like Iowa, where more than 30 percent of the energy is wind. One of the biggest employers in Iowa is MidAmerican Energy, the company that runs all those wind turbines. The farmers are very happy

because somebody comes to them and says, "Hey, can I put six wind turbines on your farm? I'll pay you 50,000 bucks a year for the privilege. All we need is some gravel access roads to be able to come and service them. You can farm up to them." They say, "Sure, where do I sign?" The electricians and the mechanics who are working on the machines are paid very well. You drive around the Iowa highways, you see the green trucks zipping all over. I mean they're big.

So [Chuck Grassley](#), for instance, is a really keen advocate of wind because he's got a very strong base in his corporate sector of workers, and then in his farming sector of even very conservative farmers, for whom this is a really powerful economic proposition, and they're sold because of the reality of it.

If you look at most of the stuff that's put out that tries to show that it's a job killer, they only look at one side of the equation. They assume a carbon fee but don't assume the revenue gets returned in any way. So it doesn't even pass muster as accounting.

**TED WIDMER:** This is an institution that cares a lot about ethics, among other things. It often seems like the way we define these issues is very short term; it's about who will win the election or the vote in the Senate this week. Even GDP is a category that's very short term. Can we change the way we talk about issues to put more weight into long-term outcomes and less weight into short-term, because the short term is always going to give you worse ethics?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** I think it may take a really significant whack in the head to get us to begin to think that way. One of the things that is observable in Congress is that values tend to be reflected only to the extent that they can be monetized.

So we are now in a month in which we have probably [killed off a third of the Great Barrier Reef](#). It's bleaching, which means that it's basically in cardiac arrest. Nobody foresees a very good future for it. It's one of the [Seven Natural Wonders of the World](#) and visible from space. But there's nobody who's monetizing the Great Barrier Reef in the United States, so nobody really gives a red-hot damn.

The pteropod is a beautiful little creature. It's a snail. It swims in the ocean with its little snail foot. It has adapted beautifully by nature to do what it does. Half of them now have [severe shell damage](#) in the Northwest Pacific from the acidification of the seas, from the absorption of carbon pollution, which changes the chemistry of the ocean so it's more acidic. You can replicate that in a high school science lab. It's not debatable science. Who cares about the damn pteropod? Well, somebody will someday care because salmon won't eat it and it won't help the salmon fishery, and then they'll be angry.

But the sort of dissolution of all of our values down to what can be monetized I think is a very important question for us to address because it's short term, it ignores things that matter but don't count, and it is a really stupid way of resolving conflicts.

**TED WIDMER:** Did the [Pope's visit](#) change that calculus, because if anyone could inject a long-term view into this, it's him. He did a lot last year. He came and he spoke in person and he wrote his [encyclical](#).

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Yes.

**TED WIDMER:** But was that just a breeze that came and went in the Senate?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Yes, I'm afraid so.

You also in many respects have not seen the Catholic Church in the United States pick up on that.

**TED WIDMER:** The bishops?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Yes. I don't see it making a very big difference in the Catholic colleges in the United States. The Conference of Bishops has been very good on this, but it hasn't kind of worked its way into the schools, it hasn't worked its way into the Catholic organizations, it hasn't worked its way into the pulpits, at least not in a way that I have seen or that anybody else seems to be noticing.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** Robert Smith, Turan Corporation in Boston.

How much has [Bernie Sanders](#) helped you, because this is one of his main issues? Maybe you can tell me if there has been any helpful output to this question by him.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** One of the truisms of politics that Bernie has [upended](#) has been that young people don't vote. You put a practicing politician in a car driving around on a campaign, and he sees a group of 30 gray-haired individuals at picnic tables, he's going to stop the car and jump out and hand out materials and say "I hope you'll all vote for me," and jump in the car and go on. He'll go 10 blocks down the street and there'll be 30 kids playing on a basketball court and he'll drive right on by. It's kind of inculcated in political culture that older people vote and younger people don't.

Younger people care an enormous amount about this issue. The fact that Bernie has now motivated them to the point where people are looking around and saying, "Wow! They can vote, they will vote. They'll get organized. We just haven't been reaching them yet." I think has really helped lift this issue.

I think it's a great opportunity for [Hillary](#) to use this issue to reach into that community. Trump is a complete nightmare on the subject—I mean just an idiot. So she has just unlimited amounts of room to maneuver. And then, I think, also in the bad political temper of our times, I think it's a telling added kind of impetus on this that: "Oh, and by the way, they're not just wrong. This is the dark hand of the fossil fuel industry controlling them. You think your voice doesn't count in Washington? You think special interests are running the show? Boy, this is your example."

I think both the merits of climate change and that extra sort of corruption juice can make it a really, really powerful election issue beyond just green people. So it's lying there latent. I'll be interested to see how it moves. But I think it really could be a very, very, very powerful issue in November.

**QUESTION:** I'm Warren Hoge of the International Peace Institute.

Senator, at the very beginning you mentioned *Citizens United* and the consequences if it could be reversed. I wanted to ask you if there's any possibility of that happening. Are there some campaign finance issues out there that might find their way to the Court one day, when hopefully the makeup of the Court will be different than it is now?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** I think that the *Citizens United* decision has proven to be an unexpected disaster from the perspective of the five—now four—surviving Justices who wrote it. I think that Justice [Kennedy](#) and Justice [Roberts](#) may be particularly sensitive to this.



So if I had to make a bet, my bet would be that Hillary Clinton becomes the president, either [Merrick Garland](#) or somebody else joins the Court. No new judge who's not picked specifically for that purpose will continue *Citizens United*. Now you have a 5–4 decision going the other way. When an occasion comes, I think there's a very strong case that Kennedy and/or Roberts would defect and go back, because it has been such a nightmare, and that ultimately we will look back on this as an eccentric and embarrassing moment in the Supreme Court's history.

But it's a real blot on the Supreme Court's record. If you look at the maneuver that it took—I mean you've got to be kind of an appellate expert to follow the course of it—the maneuvering that the Court did to be able to get to that decision was very telling. It was not calling balls and strikes, as Justice Roberts said. It was stretching the strike zone all over the place and moving the batter down to third base. I mean they really warped things a lot, and it looks very much like it was an outcome-determinative strategy. That doesn't reflect well on the Court either. The more it gets looked at, the more damaging and embarrassing that decision is going to be.

On the legislative side, I have a bill called the [Disclose Act](#). The Court left open that you should at least know who the hell is giving the unlimited amounts of money. That is something that we could cure legislatively, and it's a key part of our sort of clean-up agenda that we announced last week that we'll be taking into the election. I think that will make a difference as well.

The last thing I'll mention is that if the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) would do its job, you could clean this up very quickly. The [501\(c\)\(4\)](#) mess that allows groups that aren't supposed to do any politics at all and in return get to keep their donors private, they're reporting to the IRS that they're not engaged in politics, and at the same time they're reporting to the Federal Election Commission that they're spending \$70 million in an election. That to me looks like a false statement under the Federal Criminal Code. But the Department of Justice doesn't want to pick the fight. The IRS won't refer it to them, the IRS won't enforce anything, and they haven't tried to clean up their rules at all.

But if you want to surmise why the Republicans are kicking the hell out of the [IRS commissioner](#) [John Koskinen], I think if you've got an agency that could shut off the air hose of your dark money, it's a very powerful thing to just be batting them about the head as hard as you possibly can all the time so that they're just on defense and not thinking about what they should be doing, and basically just bullying them so that they don't do their jobs and shut the dark money air hose off. Nobody has observed this yet, but there could very easily be a powerful ulterior motive for the Republicans to beat the hell out of Koskinen that has nothing to do with whether or not he knew about the materials that were or were not disclosed.

So there's plenty of room to fix it.

**QUESTION:** Susan Gitelson.

This has been such an eye-opener. Thank you for giving us all this background information. I'd like you to continue the trend that you started now about the possibility of changing the situation. Apparently nobody knows as much as you about where the bodies are buried.

You mentioned the Catholic Church for example. What about the evangelicals? Which are the groups that take climate change very seriously and how can they be motivated? You started. Please continue.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** There's an emerging group of evangelicals. The two leaders are a woman named [Katharine Hayhoe](#), who is also a climate scientist and teaches at that well-known

left-wing redoubt Texas Tech University; and then a fellow named [Mitchell Hescocx](#), who's a very energetic, lively evangelical leader who just happens to believe that this is God's Earth and that we have an obligation to maintain it in reasonable condition for our forebearers. He is very active in a lot of the conservative and Christian colleges growing youth groups for climate action.

So there are the beginnings of some stirring in that area. I think it's important that that continue, because it's a very significant rearguard action if the Republicans are starting to hear from the evangelical side that they take this seriously.

**JOANNE MYERS:** And what about the mainline Protestants?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** I think people are pretty much onboard with that. But it doesn't turn into much political clout up against the power of the fossil fuel industry. The Protestant Church isn't saying, "We've got \$750 million we're going to spend in the election this year and if you don't get right on climate change you're going to be in political peril."

**QUESTION:** Hi. My name is Anne. I'm at the Mayor's Office of Recovery and Resiliency over the summer. I also study at the City College of New York.

My focus is on energy, and especially the role that utilities can play in reforming energy and the energy system, the infrastructure of it. I'm thinking about [Reforming the Energy Vision](#). We cannot lose sight of really incentivizing renewable energies, because right now to integrate them into community energy or micro grids is still expensive, and going back to fossil fuels is still the cheaper option.

I don't know if you can talk to what role really utilities can play in reforming this vision.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** I think a lot of the utility sector has been pretty good. In New England, we have National Grid. Out on the West Coast there's Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E). They are really leaning forward on this. When we were trying to do cap and trade, there was a utility group that was pretty active in trying to get that going.

Some of them have been less good. But even the less good ones, like Southern, are starting to come around slowly, slowly, slowly.

Renewable fuel standards are really important to them. They understand the siting risks for new plants. They are seeing, I think, real opportunity in wind and solar, particularly as large-scale private entities are showing up who can basically do the building and have it be turnkey for the utility. They are seeing, I think, opportunity, but also huge risk in distributed generation, individual rooftop, and what does that mean for them. A lot of them are in a panic that for a lot of places distributed generation means that you have to pay the person the full retail price of what comes off their roof. As that grows, that leaves no revenue to deal with their sunk costs. How do you solve that problem?

The little [battle](#) in Nevada recently was a result of that. That's a political battle that I think will sort itself out. I hope that they come up with a good standard model between the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) and Edison Electric and the solar industry. I think you could say, "Okay, this is the way we're going to handle that. That seems pretty fair across the board." And then on we go.

But you've got to say that solar and wind are really, really, really exploding. There were tens of thousands of megawatts added in the last year, and I think 60 are fossil fuel. It's just accelerating as

it gets cheaper and cheaper and cheaper. We had a Mexican official come in and say that they had just had an auction of solar at 3.5 cents equivalent kilowatt hour. The advantage of just continuing lowering of price is something that I think makes in the long term renewables a natural win.

**QUESTION:** Don Simmons.

Two ways that have been discussed for using our free market economy to reduce carbon emissions are a carbon tax and cap and trade.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Yes.

**QUESTIONER:** Which of those would you say is likelier or less unlikely to be enacted?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Carbon tax is much less unlikely. Every single Republican, whether they're former executive officials like [Shultz](#) and [Paulsen](#), or former EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) administrators, or former Republican members of Congress like [Bob Inglis](#), or famous economists like [Art Laffer](#) or [Gregory Mankiw](#)—I mean you can pick your poison. Everybody who thought this through to a solution has come to the same thing, which is a revenue-neutral carbon fee. Revenue-neutral means all the money goes back to the people; it doesn't fund bigger, more government.

Cap and trade has the disadvantage that you have to deal with a trading system. After the [Wall Street meltdown](#), to carry that burden across the line of having to trust a Wall Street-managed cap and trade—there's just no way. It's just too much of a load to carry.

The carbon fee is simple. It's border-adjustable. It allows for a better assessment of what the border adjustment should look like. If you're dealing with competing regulatory systems, how do you price that? If you're dealing with a carbon fee, it's really clear.

So we have an interesting proposition. We've got a lot of Republicans who are willing to do a bill. Talking to them about climate change is like talking to prisoners about escape. [Laughter] They're really, really careful. They want to know like, "Okay, so how do we get through the barbed wire? Is there going to be a tunnel? Are people going to escort me? How is all that going to work?" But I think everybody understands that if they get over the fence or tunnel under or get escorted out, or however that is made to work, the getaway car that they want is right there, parked, idling, and ready to go. We as Democrats are totally willing to work with them on a revenue-neutral border-adjustable carbon fee.

I call it a "fee" not a "tax," both to be cute and avoid the "tax" word, but also to be legit. A tax implies that you are raising revenues to fund the government. If it's revenue-neutral, you're not raising money to fund the government; you're giving it back. The way we give it back is that we give everybody 500 bucks, either against their payroll tax or in addition on their Social Security and veterans' benefits, and we reduce the corporate tax rate from 35 to 28 percent. There's a lot of people who are in the corporate sector who are paying a 35 percent tax rate who have said to me, "Sheldon, when that becomes a horse I want to ride it. Right now it's a unicorn. I don't see that it's all that real." But it's really hard to do anything else that can in one fell swoop lower the top corporate tax rate from 35 to 28 percent.

So that's where we are right now. If the retail sector decides to chime in because it really wants that tax reduction, that's a very powerful sector of the economy. Now you've got retail fighting fossil instead of fossil out there with nobody fighting them, and that can change the dynamics quite a lot.

So in addition to the economic merit of a carbon fee and the simplicity of a carbon fee and the bipartisan prospects of a carbon fee, it also has the chance to bring onboard strong political allies who would like that outcome.

**QUESTION:** I'm Krishen Mehta.

Senator, I wonder if there's a broader issue than climate change that is a threat to our democracy even if we take into account *Citizens United*. You've given the example of the fossil fuel industry controlling the air we breathe.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Yes.

**QUESTIONER:** The food industry through the labeling efforts controls the food we eat. The pharmaceutical industry through its lobbying efforts controls in a big way the medicines we consume.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** The price we pay.

**QUESTIONER:** The defense industry plays a big role in our foreign policy and our actions abroad. The financial service industry is also state-captured in terms of transparency and shell companies.

So this whole issue of state capture in a democracy is a big threat. As a politician, you are dealing with this all the time. I wonder what is a long-term solution for future generations that we need to get our arms around that can help us get beyond this threat.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Let me open by saying I'm a very, very strong believer in both capitalism and democracy. This election shows both on the Trump side and on the Bernie side how disillusioned and disenchanted many, many Americans have become with the way things work, both in terms of capitalism and in terms of democracy. I think they've got a real case to be made that in a whole variety of areas government has been captured by special interests. *Citizens United*, of course, put the throttles all the way forward for the special interests.

There has long been an argument in political theory that there is a difference between the influencers who come to democracy looking for results in a specific way and the general public that has an abiding interest in a polity that can defend itself from the influencers without them having to put down the plough and come in from Iowa and say, "Dammit, knock this off."

In recent years, that contest has been just completely given over to the influencers. So I think that an adjustment needs to come. As [Henry Kissinger](#) once said in a meeting, "The great transitions and the great revolutions in the world have always come from a confluence of resentments." The question is, is there a big enough confluence of resentments that you start to lose really precious things that we care about?

But I do think the people who are ardent capitalists, people who are CEOs, people who are on the boards of major corporations, need to see what is happening out there as a threat to the system that they support, that if you can't get it right and they're not willing to sacrifice a little to make capitalism honest and fair and perceived to be so, that then there is the risk that an out-of-control wave does more damage than anybody wants. I do think we're at a point where that is a conversation that people who are leaders of the business community need to have and people who are leaders in government also need to have. It's not just foreign people who are living at the sustenance level who are going to be mad as hell about us for wreaking climate change. It's going to be a lot of other people as well inside the country.

The explanation is not a good one: "Oh, yeah, sorry. Yeah, we knew for actually 30 years. We didn't do anything about it because the fossil fuel industry made threats, they gave money." That's not why they bloodied the snows of [Valley Forge](#) with their footprints.

**QUESTION:** Do you see local governments stepping up more as the federal government seems to be paralyzed?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Much more. And thank you, [Michael Bloomberg](#), for what he has done to [organize mayors](#) all around the world. States are doing a lot more.

We're actually going to be probably hemmed in a little bit by Canada and Mexico. It will be interesting. Canada is trying to organize a national carbon price. A lot of their provinces have; even Alberta, the home of the tar sands, has gone there. It will be interesting if suddenly we were having to pay a border adjustment dealing with Canada and Mexico because they had a good carbon price and we didn't. It wouldn't be a moment I would be proud of, but it would be an interesting signal to our society.

**QUESTION:** I'm Carol Spomer.

Thank you for your really remarkable presentation. I wanted to ask you what we as individuals can do to help influence this. I feel kind of powerless to do much.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** I think voices matter and organizations matter. So even if it's as simple as writing a letter to the editor, make sure your own voice is heard. And then groups like this, groups like your church or your temple or your book club—this is a room that has a lot of clout. I do think that if you both use the organizations that you're a member of and your own voice, it more and more will begin to make a difference.

We've just been through the 50th anniversary of [Bobby Kennedy's speech](#) in South Africa. Send a ripple because together the ripples can pile up and tear down the largest walls of indifference.

We actually know what the walls are. It's actually the fossil fuel industry leadership and the Chamber of Commerce leadership and *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page—to pick a few of their redoubts. [Paul Gigot](#) out to be shamed into accountability for the truly horrific dishonest position that his page takes every day on climate change. [Tom Donohue](#) at the Chamber of Commerce ought to be shamed. [Tillerson](#) at ExxonMobil ought to be shamed. Charles Koch ought to be shamed. In fact, we're close enough that Tillerson and Koch are both saying, "Oh, wait a minute. Climate change is real. Humans do have a cause in it." Tillerson and Exxon are even saying, "And we support a carbon fee." Now, they don't, that's not true, but they say it. Down on the gun decks their political armamentarium is all still pointed at anybody who might dare cross them on the Republican side and saying, "Move and I'll shoot."

But the fact that they feel that they have to say this to get through cocktail parties and to be invited to Davos and whatever it is—you know, it's a difference when they have to give lip service, even if it's phony baloney lip service. So I will take their lip service as a victory and I would ask all of you to crank up the pressure. It is simply not acceptable any longer not to be serious about climate change. The science is crystal clear. It just isn't subject to debate.

Like anything, you can find some strange point at the margin way over here where you can debate it. Really? You're going to debate the acidification of the oceans? No. You're going to debate the fundamental proposition of greenhouse gases? No. That was discovered when [Abraham Lincoln](#) was

riding around Washington in his top hat, for crying out loud.

So don't let them get away with it. You're in circles where a lot of these people exist, and they should feel the pressure. It is not acceptable, and we're all going to pay the price from their truculence and their folly if they don't come around. It's not like it's free to us to have ExxonMobil be climate deniers. It isn't, not as Americans. We look like hell because of what they're doing. It hurts every single damn one of us. It hurts every ambassador in every post in every country. It hurts our soldiers when they have a different reputation, different view of the world, when they put their boots on the ground in the country. It hurts.

It is simply not right for these very well-paid, very privileged, very protected people to continue to behave this way. It's reprehensible. And they should know it.

**TED WIDMER:** Could DoD (Department of Defense) be an ally in the years ahead? The Navy seems alert.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** The Navy is very good. [Mabus](#) has been terrific. The Navy is doing amazing investments in jet fuel from algae and things like that. They brought the price down, I think, from about \$300 per gallon to \$3-and-change per gallon in the last contract.

The problem has been that the uniformed military has been reluctant to put its voice or its image into this fight. So you get the civilians. You've got the quadrennial defense reviews. You've got the intelligence estimates. You've got the statements from our head of [USPACOM \(U.S. Pacific Command\)](#) back when Admiral [Locklear](#) said that this was the threat in the Pacific more than any other likely to disrupt things in a way that would disturb American interests. But it's hard to put a panel of people in uniform in front of the Environmental and Public Works Committee and say, "I'm a general, I'm an admiral, I'm the head of the Marine Corps. We're telling you."

What the Navy has done that has been really interesting—Ray Mabus said he's starting to actually evaluate—the military lives by evaluation—they're starting to evaluate their base commanders on how well they communicate the risk of climate change about the base. So if you're the base commander of Norfolk or of Naval Station Newport or of Cherry Creek Marine Air Station in North Carolina, you suddenly have on your checklist of what you're evaluated on how well you've communicated what the risk of climate change is. For those bases, for Navy bases particularly, it's a really real risk. They're on the sea. The sea level rise is going to swamp what they do. It's really practical.

So when people hear it from as trusted a source as a uniformed military officer, it will make a big difference. They have not been very forward about it from the uniformed side of the military. DoD has been good. Mabus has been the best.

**TED WIDMER:** There is a strategic argument also, which is that long-term desertification in Africa is sending millions of climate refugees into North Africa and into the Middle East where they can easily become recruited into war.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Yes. And we lose our major communications base in the Indian Ocean if it floods, which it looks like it's going to do.

There are really practical strategic consequences from this. The military is saying it, and so are people like [Tom Friedman](#), who's a pretty smart guy and pretty well-respected. [Read his stuff](#) about what's happening in [Syria](#) and why.



**QUESTION:** Susan Rudin.

Is it naive to think that if you follow the money trail on both sides it all comes down to greed and saving the job? The ethics of someone like [Muhammad Ali](#), who stood up and **said**, "I'll take the consequences. I'm not going to do this"—you know, he lost his salary, lost his job, lost everything, and then ended up being an international hero because he stood for what is right. Is "right might" in this case? If someone stands up, will the rest follow, and that would end it?

**QUESTION:** I'm Dr. David Bassiouni from the Bassiouni Group and originally from South Sudan. That's very important. The world's youngest country.

Senator, America's global role in climate change is so important. Without it, we would not have brought China onboard, nor India onboard, or even have the Paris Agreement. But in this country it's either misunderstood or underplayed. We don't have the population behind this elegant and laudable effort. So what can be done to bring the American population onboard?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** I'll just say quickly I think the American population is way more onboard than it would seem. You see 60–80 percent polling numbers supporting the Paris deal and recognizing the importance of climate change and so forth. And when you take Tea Partiers out, you actually even see some more numbers among regular Republicans.

**QUESTION:** Ellen Berenson.

You said that there were 10 or 12 Republican senators that you—

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Twelve to 20.

**QUESTIONER:** Twelve to 20, excuse me—that you believe are on the side of climate change policy. What can be done to put pressure on these people? I understand the reasons they feel that they can't do it. But what can be done, as representatives of elected officials, to make them be strong and support what they should be doing?

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** I think they need some political cover. So if Walmart would tell Senator Boozman "I'll have your back," that would make a big difference. If Coca-Cola based in Atlanta, Georgia, would tell Senator [Isakson](#), "We'll have your back, don't worry," that would make a big difference. If VF Corporation, which is a really big clothing conglomerate in North Carolina, would tell Senators [Tillis](#) and [Burr](#), "Don't worry, we'll have your back," that would make a big difference.

I think that the key point at this point is for the corporate sector to get off its tail and start lobbying on this. They do wonderful things within their own corporate fence line, many of them, some really just outstanding things—Mars, Cargill, General Mills, Unilever. They're just really, really, really good. And many of them actually are pushing it out. Walmart is pushing it actually up their supply chain; it's not just in the fence line.

But when they come to Congress it's like [Dante's \*Inferno\*](#)—"Abandon hope all ye who enter here." My message is actually: No, don't abandon hope. There are people who are thirsting, waiting for somebody to say, "I'll be with you if you dare to move." I think that's the same concern that we have about people standing up.

I think there will be some. I think [Lindsey Graham](#) has showed a lot of courage. He has pushed it right to the very tipping edge.

But I think beneath what you're saying is the fundamental problem that I'll revert back to. As a matter of political science, there are people for whom going to the government and exerting influence is a hugely profitable enterprise. There are others for whom it is not, and they're the vast majority. What they want more than anything else is a system that just leaves them alone and contains the influencers enough that they feel that the system itself will protect them and give them a fair shot.

That's what's gone out of balance with *Citizens United*. If you divide the world into the class of influencers and regular human beings, it's probably 4 percent and 96 percent. But for the 4 percent for whom engagement in politics is a highly remunerative proposition, there's almost no restraining them because they make money by spending money on politics. It is powerfully lucrative to distort and intrude into and interfere with the operation of the American political system. We have to fundamentally solve that problem. Then you don't need so much heroics in the face of catastrophe. You have actually a system that tends to self-clean.

What the Supreme Court totally, totally, totally missed in its *Citizens United* decision is two things. One, there actually is a political science difference between the small influencer class and the rest of the world who just want good government. The second is that if you're going to allow the influencer class to spend all that kind of money and to be as threatening as they are, what you've also allowed them to do is, if you can spend it, you can threaten to spend it.

It's that threat that they totally left out of the *Citizens United* decision. The threat is never going to be either independent of the candidate or public or transparent or any of those things that they thought of when they were just thinking about the money.

So that has been the problem. They ignored the fact of an influencer class. They ignored the fact that when you allow special interests to spend unlimited amounts of money publicly, you allow them to threaten to spend unlimited amounts of money privately. That is always going to be a backroom conversation. It has distorted and disgraced our democracy.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Senator Whitehouse, I thank you for being our ripple, maybe a wave, and, most importantly, for giving us hope.

**SHELDON WHITEHOUSE:** Does this mean I just had a Ted Talk?

**JOANNE MYERS:** You absolutely did. Thank you so much.

### Audio

"The story of our failure on climate change is a story of our failure to understand the truly manipulative and evil effects of money in politics," declares Senator Whitehouse. "It's being deployed right now. You undo Citizens United and we will have a bill in a month."

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