

RICHARD: More than 8 in 10 Americans think the country is divided, and the number has been going up in recent years. Most of us agree that significant changes are needed in the fundamental design and structure of American government to make it work for the current times. In this episode, why we need civility, compromise, and common ground.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. Today, two guests, one liberal, the other conservative, who are both working to reform American politics. Amy Dacey is Executive Director of the Sine Institute of Policy & Politics at American University. She has managed national organizations and advised leading elected officials and candidates, including President Obama and Senator John Kerry.

RICHARD: Pearce Godwin is CEO of Listen First Project and a leading member of WeavingCommunity. In his former life, Pearce worked for Republicans in the House and Senate and also on GOP campaign initiatives.

ASHLEY: Amy, let's start with a simple but important question. Why do we need to find common ground?

AMY: Well, I think so many people are counting on not only people who are involved in public service but in other sectors to find solutions to some of our largest problems. We've been able to come together in the past to do that on key issues, and that's what really has to happen to solve some of the biggest problems of today. How are we going to get on the other side of a big, huge global pandemic that everyone is trying to understand and move forward from? How are we going to get through this financial crisis that has a lot of ramifications? Then, also, globally, we are not an isolated country that doesn't have to deal with international leaders. So it all matters, and it matters not just in the public; it matters in everybody's personal life.

RICHARD: And Pearce, what do you think?

PEARCE: Yeah. I think about the fact that, for almost 250 years, America has been this great experiment, aspiring at our best to be that shining city up on a hill. Yet, in recent decades, years, and certainly months, I think many of us have this wrenching feeling that the American experiment may be failing before our eyes. And, as Amy said, it's at so many levels. These days, I'm most focused on that interpersonal level and the cultural fraying we're seeing in our social fabric that, in some ways, is fed by and also feeds, in this circular relationship, the gridlock and inability of us, in a political space, in a governing space, to work together with one another in a way that can, indeed, overcome our greatest challenges including this pandemic. But we're ripping ourselves

apart, and I think it starts at the personal, individual level but is indeed grinding Washington to a halt in a way that's not serving anyone well.

RICHARD: Pearce, you and Amy have both come from different political backgrounds. Let's start with you, Amy. During the 2016 presidential election campaign, you served as Chief Executive Officer of the Democratic National Committee. You've been deeply involved in party politics. Have you changed your mind, or do you just think that America has a hyper-partisan crisis today?

AMY: Well, I have been involved in party politics most of my life, but I was also involved in a household that championed talking about issues, talking about current events. It was not only celebrated; it was expected. And I think, over the course of time, yes, I've been affiliated with a certain party because I think it shared my values, but I've seen the division in that. I also worked on the Hill. I worked for Congresswoman Louise Slaughter, and all the time, she was talking to Republicans. Sure, there was division on things, but she would at least go and talk to her colleagues. I do think that, at our core, politics is about differences. We're in a national campaign environment. Whether it's a primary or a general election, campaigns are designed to say: what is different about these two candidates? Which one is the better path? It's about when we come together. There is a difference between campaigning and governing, and what we've seen is the division we've seen in campaigns has run rampant in the division we see in governing. That's really what has to change because you can't have that same rhetoric, narrative that's happening in the campaigns move into governing.

The other thing that I think is really important is that, when you're elected, you represent every constituent in your district, not just the ones that elected you. I think this is a big part about helping public officials realize that when they become an elected official, when they are representing their constituency, it's for people that voted for you, and it's for people that didn't vote for you. So it is your responsibility to hear all those ideas and to make decisions that's best for the community.

ASHLEY: Pearce, you come from a more Conservative background. How did you get involved in the movement to better listen to people and bring back the civility we now largely lack?

PEARCE: Right. Amy and I share some experience on the Hill. I didn't know what I wanted to do when I grew up after I graduated with a Public Policy degree but had always been drawn to politics. I used to joke it was my third favorite sport. So, indeed, I went up there after college and was fortunate to spend some time on the U.S. Senate, interned on both sides of the Hill.

RICHARD: Was this for a Conservative, Pearce?

PEARCE: Yes, it was for U.S. Senator, Elizabeth Doyle, and the summer before had interned in Senator Doyle's office and then also my Republican Congresswoman,

Virginia Foxx, in the Mountains 5th District in North Carolina. But in 2013, I decided it was time for me to head back home to North Carolina but, in the meantime, really felt a desire to do something that felt bigger than myself, more of service than my own self-promotion and striving that I was all too good a fit for in D.C. So I actually went over to Uganda for six months, in Africa, and that's where my journey began. These past seven years, I have been more driven to mend our frayed social fabric than champion any particular party or candidate.

ASHLEY: We know, when you look at national surveys, it seems most Americans don't want this rancor to continue. They do want to be able to have civil conversations with the other side. Okay. So then, why does it feel like we can't at the personal level? Why does it so often get off the rails?

AMY: Well, I think, in a lot of respects, one of the biggest challenges is we might disagree on some of the big topics, but we can find nuances in some of the smaller subsets of this. And we don't go there. We immediately go, "You want this. You want that." And I think, too often, we use the pro/con language. So you're either for healthcare, for the ACA, or you're against it, or you're for immigration or you're against it. What we don't talk about is the different policy stances within, and sometimes you can find common ground within them.

I think about some of the opportunities over the years, whether it was the Jobs Act or the Bipartisan Budget Act. On a macro level, we might say Republicans and Democrats don't agree on these issues, but when they found a piece of it, and they moved it forward, they worked together. Leadership comes from the top. So, when we see our leaders not coming together, where we see sometimes is a sport that, "I'm right. You're wrong," or, "We won." Everybody should win in that process, not one party. And I think that theme and that tone has kind of affected some of the individual conversations.

RICHARD: Amy, do you have an example of a policy or an important concern where Democrats and Republicans may share more common ground than they realize?

AMY: Yeah, I do think that there's pieces that we can come together on. Jobs and the economy, we have to find a way to come together because it's so interconnected. I think, during this pandemic, we've learned some of these supply chains, some of these jobs, some of these industries that we just took for granted, how something like this can affect it and then how it can affect the individual whether they're in that industry or not. So I think, on healthcare, on jobs and the economy, I think on infrastructure, I think that there are things that we can find that area of agreement.

The question I guess that we're asking a lot at the Sine Institute and I think others need to ask: are we going to make progress at the macro level until we start having some of these conversations on different pieces to these big legislative issues, and where can we find them? I think that there's other people doing work that's fantastic to show like commonality and issue areas within individuals and not necessarily within the parties or within elected officials. But I think of Common Ground Solutions and how they're trying

to find issue areas where at least you can come to the table and talk. And if you can share that with public officials, if you can share that with individuals, they might find they have more common ground.

ASHLEY: Pearce?

PEARCE: Yeah. There are so many structural and environmental factors that are not helping, at best, in terms of our national divisions and polarization and especially affective polarization, which means I don't just disagree with you but I really deeply dislike, even disdain you. One great way to find belonging is in opposition to the Other, and I think that's what we found in the tribalization is that a lot of us are very, very comfortable and finding a lot of our identity and even our worth in opposition to Them. Certainly we see that right now in the presidential race. People have different views of the individual candidates, but many folks, polling shows, are driven as much by a fear of what they will do to America, indeed obliterate the nation we love, as opposed to necessarily being proactively for any particular candidate or any particular position. I think that's an extremely dangerous place for us to be, and when we are tribalized in that sense against the Other, we have this tendency to retreat into our comfortable homogeneous tribes and just lash out.

RICHARD: Pearce, what's a constructive response to this lashing out, this tribalization of our politics.

PEARCE: My hope and prayer is that we'll step out and bravely step forward into a different future, one that's built on fresh, authentic relationships that weave a stronger social fabric in local communities and do build those bridges across differences. I think if we choose that second path, starting at the individual level, then we can transform this tide of rising rancor, deepening division, increasing isolation, into, instead, a wave of respect, connection, and belonging.

AMY: Neither party benefits from individuals' lack of confidence in our institutions. So that's one place where I do think we have to come together. So, in a sense, not thinking that our court system works or that our police system works or that our public officials are fighting for them, those kind of things don't work for the Republican Party. It doesn't work for the Democratic Party. And I think that's a place where we have to come together and say, "How do we rebuild confidence in the electorate, in the constituencies out there to say their government can work for them?" Now, I'm not saying that Republicans and Democrats won't differ on the size, the scope, but not having confidence in those institutions, we're all harmed by that in some way.

PEARCE: Absolutely. And one thing that brings to mind, Amy, is the tendency for us to probably think too narrowly and short-term and, if you're a candidate, maybe in your own individual interest. Any of us could zoom out and agree completely with what Amy is saying there, but perhaps some candidates may think it's an immediate electoral advantage, and somehow the means justifies the ends to even chip away at the

moment. But to degrade confidence in those institutions, I think that's an extremely dangerous game that we're playing.

RICHARD: Has our inability to be able to agree affected us in dramatic ways? I'm thinking especially of something like coronavirus, where if we had all approached the pandemic in a less divisive way, then perhaps we could've agreed more readily on the facts and saved many, many lives. Amy?

AMY: I would say we're making these issues partisan in a way, and we're looking at them like the party's either for or against. This is something we should be coming together on as a community. Why don't we have really strong civics programs in our schools? I used to get it at home. We talked about civics all the time. I would go to school, and we talked about it all the time. So lack of knowledge in the system, too, I think leads to these assumptions. You think, right after 9/11, having empathetic leaders who bring us all together to say, "We have a common problem," this should've been the moment where there wasn't this division.

I was recently, just yesterday, talking to Governor Larry Hogan, and talking to him about how, regionally, governors and local elected officials regionally from different parties came together to say, "Oh, this is going to affect our region. How do we do this?" His role in the National Governors Association, how those leaders came together, that's what we have to see and focus on. A pandemic doesn't stop at a state border. We have to stop thinking that something that happens in Utah doesn't affect us if we're sitting here in New Jersey. We're so interconnected not only in this country but globally. I think it has been a big challenge.

ASHLEY: So much of our political debate today is framed by slogans and social media, and politicians, they're sort of enthralled to that, as well. Some are very active on social media, and when you are on social media, you tend to be interacting with your tribe, and you get rewarded for giving them what they want when it comes to retweets and comments and all the rest of it.

PEARCE: Indeed. We're all on these uber-public platforms, and I think a lot of us can fall into the desire to virtue signal and to prove our stripes within our tribe. That's tough. Certainly, in... it used to be 140 and now 280 characters, tough to bring in too much of that nuance that Amy put on the table. So we end up in these constant sound bites and invectives and in pro/con framing that gets all sorts of retweets and likes, and, "Boy, do I feel special because I got a real good zinger out there."

That is just adding to the noise, adding to the fraying, indeed, around the pandemic. We talked about it for years, "Let's move from us versus them to me and you." And one might think that a global pandemic, to Amy's point, that doesn't know borders, doesn't know party, would've done that. But with the pandemic, I agree completely with Amy. There was some incredibly encouraging polling out of More In Common in April, where the sense of being in this together had spiked, the sense that we're united had spiked. They haven't re-fielded that, but I think we could all expect it's probably at pre-

pandemic, if not worse, levels right now because it did become immediately politicized. And, indeed, as Amy mentioned earlier, we're taking signals from our leader. We're taking parameters of, "What does it mean to be a good soldier for my team?" from our leader. And those signals very quickly politicize things as simple as wearing a mask, which of course has had a horrific deleterious impact on the health of our nation.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. We're speaking with Amy Dacey and Pearce Godwin about the urgent need to find common ground and open up ways of conversation. In a few minutes, we'll ask them about the new Common Ground Scorecard, which gives politicians a score on their ability to reach out beyond their base to voters and other elected officials who come from another party or background.

ASHLEY: Before we hear more from Amy and Pearce, a word about what we do at Common Ground Committee. At its heart, our mission to bring more progress, less division. Find out more about our public events and how you can get involved at commongroundcommittee.org.

RICHARD: We release a new podcast every two weeks. This is number 13. Now back to Amy and Pearce. We want to ask both of you about your personal work to further civility, common ground, and compromise. Those phrases, though, often are associated with nice, polite people talking calmly. Yet, I get the impression from both of you that you're fired up about this, that it's urgent that we compromise, that it's urgent that we talk about nuance. Amy, you're at the Sine Institute. What does that work involve?

AMY: Well, the private sector, nonprofits, journalism, academia, they all play a part in this. So, when we're talking about the coming together, it's not just Democrats and Republicans, too. It's about: how is the business community working with the public sector in order to find that common ground, as well? So, in a great way, whether it's through our fellowship program or through some of our other programming or the research that we're doing, and I think Pearce's work does this, too... It's not like it's, "Come and agree on everything." But how do you have a healthy debate? We don't have conversations anymore, and I think, reading up on all that Pearce is doing, it's like, "Let's have a conversation." We don't have to leave that table and agree on everything. You might not change my mind on everything. But where's the civility in having the conversation? So what we're trying to do at the Sine Institute, too, is to be that convener, to bring different opinions. What greater conversation would be there be with former Representative Paul Ryan and Senator Patty Murray to say, "How did you reach a budget deal?"

ASHLEY: Patty Murray and Paul Ryan are from different parties, and they worked out an agreement despite a lot of differences. So you're saying this can be done.

AMY: A lot of this is happening locally. We're seeing city councils. We're seeing state legislatures. We're seeing governors and mayors from different parties have to figure these things out because they're forced to, and they have to, but in a sense that they champion that. So I think that's the big piece of it and why I really appreciate Pearce's work, too. We can't get anywhere unless we have the conversation, and I think we've even forgotten how to have that conversation to listen and to leave with maybe knowing a little something and not change your mind completely when you leave. That's not the expectation, but that you might see from the other side.

And I will say this. One of the greatest personal experiences for me, when I was at the DNC, my counterpart at the RNC, Katie Walsh, has become one of my great friends. And we have had really intense conversations that we don't agree on the issues, but then suddenly I can see her perspective. I feel like, if you can see somebody's perspective, you might not still end up agreeing with them, but we all come from different perspectives, and that's what's being left out of the conversation, too.

RICHARD: Amy has done a great job, Pearce, of promoting your work. Let's hear what you do.

PEARCE: Thank you, Amy, very kind. Listen First Project's mission is to mend America's frayed social fabric by building relationships and bridging divides with conversations that prioritize understanding. So we founded the Listen First Coalition initially for organizations, now 350, with Common Ground Committee very much in the lead. We're driving the National Conversation Project, which is the overarching movement platform of this whole field, and that includes Annual and National Weeks of Conversation, Listen First Fridays, and currently the WeavingCommunity campaign, which we launched at the onset of the pandemic in partnership, co-creating that with David Brooks's, New York Times columnist, Weave project at the Aspen Institute. So, with that current WeavingCommunity campaign, the goal is to inspire millions of Americans of all stripes to start or deepen relationships in their community. Your listeners are welcome to check it out at weaving.us and put themselves on the map. We'd love to see how they are connecting and caring and creating a future together with those relationships in their communities.

But four key principles that I want to highlight: one, just listen first to understand; two, be curious and open to learning; which brings us to number three, anything we can do to suspend judgment and expand grace. I've really been thinking about that word, grace. How little grace are we having for folks with whom we might disagree and across these various lines of difference? Then, finally, whatever we can do to maximize our diversity of perspectives both in the media space... It's statistically much less likely than it used to be that I am anywhere near in proximity to somebody who looks different and thinks different than I do. So it does take a little more effort these days, but to maximize that diversity of perspectives is going to allow us, I think, to more effectively live in society and relationships and also push the nation in a direction that can serve all.

ASHLEY: Politicians are rewarded for being all-in with their tribe partially because of gerrymandering and how congressional districts are drawn. With that in mind, how do we find candidates who are willing to talk to the other side?

AMY: I think there's just challenges. When you think about gerrymandering, you think about the way these districts are designed. There's literally some institutional infrastructure issues with politics in this country that we have to figure out in order to do that. The diversity in this country, you think about statewide elected officials, well, they have to find ways to reach out to very different audiences. Where are you having the conversations? Who do you have to bring in? And I think these districts sometimes don't reflect a diverse group of people and interests, but we get the government we have because we have voter apathy, and we don't have as many people voting or having confidence in the system.

So having the education and going out there, civics, teaching people that, yes, politics is personal. These people, whether you vote and elect them or not, are going to make decisions about your personal life and how that affects you. So I think we really have to look at it from both perspectives, and we have to push from both sides. We have to help candidates understand that even if they win, they are representing their whole district. So having that conversation earlier is important, but then really helping citizens understand that they get to make these decisions.

RICHARD: Let's look at some ways that might help people if they believe that finding common ground is a vital election issue. This podcast is produced by Common Ground Committee, which has put out something new called Common Ground Scorecard. Pearce, what is it? What does it do?

PEARCE: There's never been a tool to measure the degree to which those elected officials are pursuing common ground. As you mentioned, Common Ground Committee recognized that gap and what a value that would be. So I'm personally so excited and grateful that the Common Ground Scorecard now exists. It's built to provide an objective, easy-to-understand assessment of the degree to which our elected officials and candidates for office embody the spirit and practice of a common grounder. Well, that's cute. What the heck is a common grounder? Common Ground Committee has defined that as someone who speaks points of agreement and solutions on social and political issues through listening and productive conversation.

RICHARD: So, if a politician gets a high score on this Common Ground Scorecard, that's an indication that this person is open to finding common ground?

PEARCE: Exactly right, and your listeners can check it out hot off the presses at commongroundscorecard.org. Some of the things, and I was involved in the development of the scorecard... Some of the things we looked at is there's not one, two, or even just three ways that somebody might embody that spirit of a common grounder, whether they be in the House of Representatives or the Senate or one of our

governors or candidates for one of those offices. There could be a number of different ways that the candidates and office-holders are behaving and speaking in a way that is positively reinforcing and propelling the desire that Amy and I have been discussing for there to be common ground.

So, overall, and we can dive in as deeply as you like, but one of the things we're looking at is official performance. So, if you're on the Hill in the House and the Senate, to what degree are you sponsoring or co-sponsoring legislation from across the aisle? If you are a governor, to what degree is your job approval reflecting bipartisan support for the work you're doing? Are you getting beyond your base? And we thought about public conversations across political differences. When are people getting out there, as Amy suggested that Patty Murray and Paul Ryan might, and talking about how they work together? Are you joining an official from the opposing party for a visit of their district? How cool to get where somebody else lives and to get to know their space. Then, in the House, you know there's a caucus for everything, and there's several, incidentally, that are focused around this idea of common ground, so membership in that. The last couple is communication... Are you out there promoting common ground practices? Or, in some cases, unfortunately, are you insulting your political opponents? We consider that and deduct points for that, as well. Then the final major category is commitments, and Common Ground Committee has come up with 10 commitments that someone can affirm, affirming these 10 commitments towards common ground. And that constitutes, ultimately, the 100-point scale with a 10-point opportunity for a bonus for people who really just are going above and beyond to champion the idea of common ground.

ASHLEY: But to champion a common ground politician, people need to vote. A lot of young Americans, in particular the 18 to 29 set, they don't even vote. How do we convince that age group to go to the polls?

AMY: We've seen so many studies that say if you get somebody who's 18 and they vote for the first time, you could get somebody who continually votes. Civics education, helping them understand how the politics is personal... I think, also, young people, a lot of times the question is: where does change come from? Does it come from the inside out with public officials and the legislative process, or can they push from the outside in? My argument would be: be involved in the process. Be civically minded. Be involved in your community. And if you want to be an advocate and fight for issues, whatever your role is, you can find that opportunity. When I first started in politics, you would just push messages out there on the evening news and others, and people would come in and get it. But now you really have to go where people are getting the information.

So where are young people? Where are they getting that information? Who are the influencers that can help make that case about how important it is to be civic-minded and to be involved. You've seen a lot with professional athletes, with the entertainment industry, the music industry saying about their involvement, and I do think that helps. But the other big thing is peer-to-peer conversations are probably the most impactful.

If you've committed to vote and you've made a plan to vote, just go talk to your friends about doing it. That will have more influence than me saying it's the right thing to do. But I think it is a responsibility for every sector to talk about voting and civic responsibility. I know a lot of companies are making sure that either people have time off to be poll workers or trying to figure out: how do they make sure that their employees are able to vote? All these different entities have to come together to want to work collectively on this.

RICHARD: What gives you hope in this time of such deep division? Pearce?

PEARCE: For me, as a Christian, I often think about scripture. There's a most timely Bible verse that has been giving me hope for the last several months. It speaks to the redeeming possibility through this pain. From Isaiah, it says, "I am doing a new thing. Now it springs forth. I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." Similarly, author David Brooks, who I'm partnering with on WeavingCommunity says, "We're in a valley now. It's an opportunity for a new earth."

AMY: I think I take hope from the fact that some of the most challenging moments in this country's history have been really taking a hard look at ourselves and some of these issues that are tearing us apart. We're doing that now, and I find hope in that we're having these conversations. I think you can focus on the negative. There are so many examples, especially on the local level, of people coming together, of acts of kindness, of communities and fellowship to try and figure out how we do this together when we're faced with such adversity at this time. And for all the concern about young people not being a part of the process, I think we have to shine a light when the are. I think about the students at Parkland. I think about all the young activists in the environmental climate space. Let's shine a light on the work that they're doing to show others what it's capable of and how you can use your voice. It does happen. It does exist, and it can be done. Let's replicate it in other places. I'm very hopeful for that.

ASHLEY: Thank you both so much for being with us.

AMY: Thank you. This was fun.

ASHLEY: Amy Dacey and Pearce Godwin. In the coming weeks, we'll have more briefings on election issues.

RICHARD: And check out the Common Ground Scorecard, a useful tool for informed voters in the days leading up to the election. Find it at commongroundscorecard.org.

ASHLEY: Let's Find Common Ground is a production of Common Ground Committee. Thanks for listening.