

ASHLEY: How we talk about the environment and climate has a lot to do with how we see things. Do we focus on the threats or spend more time on innovation and the opportunities for constructive change? With a new administration, the debate and the language being used are changing almost week-by-week. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. In this episode, we ask: can business bridge the gap? Sustainability investments by financial and corporate leaders are rapidly increasing in both size and frequency.

ASHLEY: We speak with Stephanie Hanes and Mark Trumbull of The Christian Science Monitor. This episode is the latest in a series with Monitor editors and reporters.

RICHARD: Stephanie is the newspaper's Environment & Climate Change Writer. Mark is currently the Monitor's Economy & Science Editor.

ASHLEY: I ask Stephanie first about framing. The words and phrases used by the Biden administration to talk about environmental challenges are more positive in some ways, aren't they?

STEPHANIE: Well, I think for a long time people have framed climate change in environmental terms, and people have talked a lot about the potential dangers of climate change. And, at a certain point, I believe that some of the people who are quite concerned about climate, they realized that this is not a particularly motivating way to talk about a big issue. And so, what you've seen is climate change advocates starting to really talk in terms of solutions and opportunities of how addressing this reality is a great way to build jobs, to build innovation, to mobilize human capacity. You're seeing that shift in the rhetoric because that's more appealing for people. It doesn't make people just want to hide.

RICHARD: Mark, I was really struck by the different tone from Joe Biden when he spoke to Congress recently. He seemed to frame climate change as something that could be exciting for the American economy as opposed to just doom and gloom.

MARK: Absolutely, and as Stephanie was just saying, there's a very good tactical reason for that, and I think there's also a substantive shift in thought that's been happening that goes beyond Democratic Party agendas. It's really a change among Americans and, really, worldwide toward a growing concern that climate change is real, where many of us feel like we can see some of the effects out there. We may not always know how much of this is exactly attributable to climate change, but concern has certainly risen, and that's filtered over into the business community. There's more people thinking, "If we don't do something about climate, that's actually an economic problem."

ASHLEY: I'd love to talk about unions because some unions were definitely skeptical of the Green New Deal. Do you think they're on board with what Joe Biden's talking about now? Is the shift in language partly an attempt to find common ground and broaden the appeal of steps to tackle what's going on with the climate and the environment?

STEPHANIE: There is more union support of the American Jobs Plan than there was of the Green New Deal, and part of this is political. Obviously, President Biden has courted union support for a while. But part of this is that unions are looking at what I think increasingly seems like an inevitable path forward. There is a lot of data right now that show climate action can create a huge number of jobs depending on how it's mobilized and that a large number of those jobs are going to go to workers without a college degree. With the right policy investments, unions see a potential for more jobs in these new areas.

RICHARD: I was really struck by how the administration is now talking about jobs as opposed to just green jobs or renewable energy jobs.

STEPHANIE: Definitely. That's the administration's new line. When you listen to Gina McCarthy, for instance, talk about climate change, she doesn't talk about the environment. She talks about jobs, and she talks about good-paying union jobs.

RICHARD: And Gina McCarthy's job is...?

STEPHANIE: The White House National Climate Advisor.

ASHLEY: But that seems really smart. It's just a tiny change in language that helps sort of de-politicize the topic.

MARK: Yeah, and I think it's going at a very real challenge because the openness that some unions are having that Stephanie mentions is real, but the skepticism is also still real. This is an unsettling time in the economy for a lot of workers. There are real worries about Biden is telling us everything's going to be exciting, but will that really pan out? So I think this is a sales effort that isn't going to be over in a week or a month. Any administration is going to have to prove that this clean energy transition actually does produce good-paying jobs.

STEPHANIE: Yeah. I think what's really interesting about this in terms of how the administration is talking about these new jobs is they're actually quite careful to not be exchanging just fossil fuel jobs for clean energy jobs. They're looking at climate-action-related jobs in a much broader way than simply clean energy because they know that, while clean energy does have a huge economic benefit for many different regions in different ways, it's hard to compare those apples-to-apples. A solar farm does not, in fact, lead to the same number of jobs and high-paying jobs as a fossil fuel plant in many cases.

But if you look at climate action in large whether that's construction, retrofitting, whether it's clean energy, whether it's the technological developments that you might have in new cement processes or steel processes, you're looking at a much broader and much more diffuse economic system. I think the administration is trying to focus that and move the conversation away from coal versus wind or coal versus solar to old economy and new economy.

RICHARD: Let's talk about politics for a moment. Usually, we think of swing voters as living in the suburbs. But what I've noticed from Joe Biden, from Gina McCarthy, from other members of the administration is not framing this in terms of middle class but working class and blue-collar jobs.

MARK: Yeah, it's a hard one, and the fact is, as Stephanie was just saying, this transition to clean energy is going to create just a lot of jobs. If the Biden plan is passed, that's a huge amount of money going towards everything from energy retrofits to building out the actual power grid in new ways and more solar arrays, more wind farms. That all takes all kinds of jobs.

RICHARD: It's not just climate skeptics who are pushing back against this big change in policy by the Biden administration. It's also Conservatives and Libertarians who may think that we do have a climate emergency but really question the expansion of government.

STEPHANIE: You're absolutely right, but I'll step back for a second with you, maybe, and just talk about how interesting that is that we've moved the conversation from, "Is there climate change?" to perhaps a more functional conversation of, "What's the best way to deal with it?" You will find some honest political divisions there about whether big government is the answer or whether leaving it to the private market entirely is the answer or something in between. That debate is happening, but what I think is new is that debate is happening between two different political sides that both believe, say, in solar energy and the importance of clean energy and the forward path of many of these renewables. I think that's fairly new. [00:09:09]

MARK: It's so new that it's kind of a partial one on the Republican side, where a lot of younger Republican voters are very much invested in the idea that climate change is real, and we better find a solution. We just want, for them, a Conservative-style solution that taps into free markets and not big government. But then this transition is a gradual one. It's very much a spectrum from people who are not invested in this issue to some who are saying, "We need to act. We want clean energy," and are even joining, gradually, this thing called the Climate Solutions Caucus in Congress that has both Democratic and Republican members.

I think it's so interesting that they chose to call it Climate Solution Caucus. Going back to the whole reframing of this issue, they didn't call it the Climate Crisis Caucus. There is common ground there about looking for solutions.

STEPHANIE: There really are these interesting areas where now we're grappling with policy. There's an interesting centrist, bipartisan effort to forward the idea of a carbon pricing policy or a carbon tax, as people tend to call it, although they don't really like calling it a carbon tax, but putting a price on carbon and using market forces then to try to make the carbon-reducing changes that are necessary. You'll have people on the more Progressive side of the political spectrum arguing for different changes. So, all of a sudden, now we're all talking about ideas as opposed to just divisive ideology.

ASHLEY: Let's talk about public/private partnerships for a minute. There are some big changes in how big companies and investors are responding to the climate challenge, right?

STEPHANIE: Yes. We have seen a lot of announcements recently. So you have a lot of companies talking about how they want to become net zero by the middle of the century, and you have a lot of people talking about commitments for lowering emissions. You also see a huge emphasis on the private sector. At the Climate Leaders Summit the other week, there were entire sessions dedicated to exploring how to best motivate the private sector.

Pretty much everybody agrees that the private sector is necessary if we are going to address climate change, and that's for a number of reasons not least of which, as you mention, in terms of financial, it's going to take a huge amount of money to address climate change more so than any country or any group of countries has in the budget. So private sector is necessary. What actually is happening and what some of these commitments actually mean and the best way to motivate this private-sector investment, those are all still questions that are out there.

RICHARD: Yeah, I was going to ask about that. How business-friendly is the administration? You certainly get criticism from the Right that this is all about government, and the Biden administration simply just wants to boost regulations and raise taxes and that that's not a way to encourage innovation.

MARK: On climate, at least, they have not yet proposed a carbon tax as part of their plan. So that's an interesting issue to me that they haven't. That does speak possibly to the idea that, as Stephanie says, the word "tax" is not all that popular. So they're instead talking about their taxes being on the very rich and on corporations in general. I think they're leading with the most hopeful side of their policy portfolio, which is, "Let's incentivize more clean energy." At some point, though, people on the Left want to see an actual attack on the fossil fuel sector. Let's try to drive that down and keep it in the ground, as they say. Maybe the first step toward new climate action under Biden is this. Let's get new investment going.

STEPHANIE: In fact, he's been pretty careful to not talk about regulations. That's the historic way that people saw environmental action was the government telling companies, "No, you can't do this. No, you have to do that. Here is something costly that you have to do in order to protect the earth." And the Biden administration has really tried to shift that. They're not talking about regulations. They're talking about opportunities, and he's certainly talking about significant changes to some industries whether it's electric cars or the electric grid, but they're trying really hard to avoid that regulation narrative framework right now.

ASHLEY: Talk about innovation for a minute because innovation's a big part of this, and you just mentioned electric cars. There have been advances in battery technology, all sorts of things that electric cars can do now that they couldn't a few years ago, and also renewable energy, new sources of nuclear power. Can you talk about some of that?

STEPHANIE: Yeah. Mark, do you want to take that, or do you want me to go?

MARK: Sure. Yeah, I will say that it's been a really remarkable last 10 years, and I think it's going to be a really remarkable next 10 years because when you look at what people were predicting would happen for the cost of solar power or the cost of electric vehicles, the progress has gone faster than people have been predicting. All of a sudden, we have a world where wind and even solar are competing head-to-head with natural gas and generating electric power.

We have a world where electric vehicles, they have government incentives still, but they're also competing head-to-head with gas-powered cars when you look over the lifetime of the vehicle. And this is due to those advances in battery storage, which are hugely important. If we're going to decarbonize the economy, so much depends on being able to store power not just when you're driving a car but for the whole electric grid when you're, say, generating power in the daytime with sunlight. How do you store some of that to use at night when people are running a last load of laundry or something?

The nuclear power thing you mentioned is potentially big, although of course that is more controversial. The public is much more divided about the virtues of nuclear power and, even for climate change activists, it's a difficult issue because so many environmentalists see that as a fundamentally dangerous energy source. Yet, many other people say it is a clean source when it's compared to fossil fuels. The kind of new nuclear reactors that are being developed could provide cheaper and safer nuclear power. So it'll be interesting to see what happens.

RICHARD: Mark Trumbull and Stephanie Hanes of The Christian Science Monitor.

ASHLEY: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. More coming up after we tell you, first, about a virtual event produced by Common Ground Committee and featuring John Kasich, Republican and former governor of Ohio.

ASHLEY: And Julian Castro, a Democrat who served as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Obama administration.

RICHARD: They both had a lively Common Ground debate and discussion. Here's one brief extract from Governor Kasich.

GOVERNOR KASICH: With the Secretary, I think we could sit down and be in great, great harmony on... This is about common ground. He's a great guy. You know, we could sit here and talk about this. He's a good man. He is, and if we sat down and we talked about HUD or we talked about Ohio, whatever, we could find things that we could agree on because we're not in this to get elected or score a point. I could care less about all this political garbage that's out there. I want to solve problems and help people.

ASHLEY: You can see the event for yourself on the Common Ground Committee YouTube channel.

RICHARD: Subscribe free and find other good content featuring national leaders from different viewpoints finding common ground on today's big issues.

ASHLEY: Now more from our interview with Mark Trumbull and Stephanie Hanes.

RICHARD: How is the Biden administration reaching out to other governments around the world to seek common ground on fighting climate change?

MARK: They're reaching out in a big way with John Kerry going hither and yon despite the pandemic, and they're reaching out partly by trying to lead by example. I think, after four years of inaction on this issue because it was not one that was of interest to the Trump administration, I think Biden is trying to send a signal, "We're back. We're doing something, and this means you can do something."

It'll just be very interesting to see how much the U.S. can accomplish and how much, really... China, for instance, has a big interest in transitioning its economy. It just has such a huge and still developing economy that's it's very hard for them to quickly transition away from coal. Similar for India, they want to transition, but this is not an easy thing. This aspect of bringing international cooperation is going to be a long one.

STEPHANIE: I think it actually brings us back to this innovation question that we were talking about where I think there's a general understanding that we need new ways to make transitioning to a climate-friendly economy easier. And all of the promises for

emissions reductions depend on technology, in some ways, that doesn't exist yet. And so I think that one of the ways that the Biden administration really hopes to move the world is certainly by example and by showing that the U.S. will once again be a leader on this, in the administration's view. But I think it's also to go back to that private sector and to really encourage the type of technological innovation that will allow for places like China or India and elsewhere to incorporate technologies in a way that doesn't cause real harm, or it doesn't cause huge sacrifice.

ASHLEY: Talking about the private sector for a second, haven't banks here in the U.S. been making some innovative moves?

STEPHANIE: It's really hard. This is another place where proponents of government action will say there's a real role for the government here because a number of big banks have said they want to both invest in and support climate action technology, climate-friendly business. They want to make sure portfolios are net zero, but there are some big questions about what that actually means.

How do you know something is net zero? Right now, we don't actually have a very good way or a universal way to determine that. So there has been some conversation about, "Well, how do we create a standardized and reliable way to understand what net zero actually means?" So a number of banks and investment firms and other groups in the financial sector have been making really big commitments that many in the climate action world see as progress.

RICHARD: Yeah, and JP Morgan Chase announcing a goal to finance \$2.5 trillion in climate change and sustainable investment activity within the next nine years. Other announcements that are also very large from Citigroup, HSBC, and Bank of America. Yet, still, I take your point that it remains to be seen how that's all defined.

MARK: And some of these announcements are so recent that we just need to wait and see. But the promise would be that I think this symbolizes a real change in thinking, that over time, corporations are seeing climate change as a very real issue, not just one that they're getting, say, pressure from some of their employees or some of their consumers, "What are you doing about climate change?" But they actually see it from the corner office as something that is either a potential risk, a very real risk, not just a potential one, to their future but also a source of promise.

ASHLEY: People you meet in the course of your reporting, have you detected any more common ground lately among those who traditionally would've been called climate change deniers and those who are full-on, "No, no, this is happening"?

STEPHANIE: I think a good example of this is we're reporting a story right now that's going to be based primarily in the Midwest and in a lot of fairly red counties in the rural parts of Illinois. Where I think is an interesting spot for common ground is the way that people are supporting clean energy and renewables and sort of agreeing to not have

the debate about whether climate change is existing or not. There are other really good reasons for these counties to have solar and wind energy.

A lot of these rural counties, for instance, don't have a lot of property tax income coming in. They don't have enough money for their schools. They're facing a situation where school districts are going to have to consolidate. They don't have a ton of money for fire departments. And some of these wind projects come in and pay landowners, farmers who, as you guys well know, are often operating without a huge amount of profit. They're paying landowners to put wind turbines on to the property. So the farmers have money. The schools are able to stay open. The roads get better. And the farmers might notice and say that this is better than an extraction type of industry because, once the wind turbine goes away, they can still plant their corn there, and it doesn't really matter whether they believe climate change predictions. So we know this is still a core issue, but in some ways, people are finding common ground because they're moving past that and just going right to the solutions.

RICHARD: Nevertheless, public opinion can be important. Has it moved in recent years?

STEPHANIE: It has. Mark, do you want to talk a little bit about that?

MARK: Sure. Yes, Stephanie and I love to look at these charts and polling from the Yale Climate Communications program.

RICHARD: You're so wonky.

MARK: That's right.

STEPHANIE: Don't you do that for fun?

MARK: Actually, these maps are colorful. They allow you to zoom in on your own county or your own congressional district. So it is wonky, but it's also more fun than an awful lot of wonky stuff. And one thing that they do show is that, in recent years, there has been a steady increase in people believing that climate change is happening, that humans are a significant reason for that, and that some action should be taken about it. So, just for instance, in 2014, 52% of Americans said they were worried about global warming. And as of 2020, that had risen to 63% of Americans.

STEPHANIE: You also see a real decrease in the number of people who simply deny that global warming is happening. Most people believe that there should be research into renewable energy sources, and 75% of people support regulating carbon dioxide as a pollutant. These are some really big numbers and represent a significant shift from a decade, 15 years ago.

RICHARD: Thank you very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground, Stephanie and Mark.

MARK: Thank you. It's been real fun.

STEPHANIE: Thank you.

ASHLEY: Stephanie Hanes and Mark Trumbull in our latest podcast featuring editors and reporters from The Christian Science Monitor.

RICHARD: Hear more at our website, commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

ASHLEY: We're also a member of the Democracy Group podcast network. One of the other shows worth listening to is Democracy Matters.

RICHARD: On Democracy Matters, hosts Abe Goldberg and Carah Ong Whaley of the James Madison Center for Civic Engagement have in-depth conversations with guests that include John Dickerson, Julia Azari, and Ethan Zuckerman. They talk about issues including a just and inclusive democracy.

ASHLEY: Find out more about Democracy Matters by searching for it in your podcast app.

RICHARD: That's our show. Let's Find Common Ground has new episodes every two weeks. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.