

LFCG Episode 53

ASHLEY: The public's trust in government is near an all-time low. Increasingly, members of Congress are recognizing that polarization and division in the United States is a threat to how democracy functions. We speak to two of them, one Republican, one Democrat. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Democrat Derek Kilmer and Republican William Timmons are both Bridge Builders. They work together on the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. They've already agreed on a series of proposals that could help make Congress function better.

ASHLEY: Both congressmen also support the Building Civic Bridges Act, a proposal that would send funding to federal and local efforts to reduce polarization. We'll learn more about this in our interview.

RICHARD: We've got a lot of ground to cover. Ashley, you get the first question.

ASHLEY: As we record this, the war in Ukraine is raging. Do you think Putin's invasion has offered a chance for both parties in Congress to work more constructively together as they respond to this urgent crisis?

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: I think so. You saw during the President's State of the Union, this was one area where there was not a divide between Democrats and Republicans. There was full-throated support for the people of Ukraine and I think solidarity in wanting to stand up to Putin. But the nature of our question drives at some of what bedevils Congress right now. There was a recent poll that found that 70% of Americans believe our country is so polarized that it is incapable now of solving big problems, and, certainly, the situation in Ukraine is a big problem that needs us to get beyond partisanship and be able to do what's best for not just our country but for the world.

ASHLEY: Congressman Timmons?

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: I agree with the chairman. I think it is a great opportunity for Republicans and Democrats to set aside their policy differences. It's just shocking to me in that in 2022, the sovereignty of a European country is being challenged. I'm hearing some terrible reports about human rights violations. I just can't believe that we're in this position right now, and I think that the United States needs to take a stronger leadership position in the world and make sure that everyone knows that this is not going to happen, and we need to provide the strongest check possible to protect the lives of our allies in Ukraine. So I do think that this is a great spot for us to work together, and I think that there's no partisan challenges here.

RICHARD: Have you seen some signs of that happening as a result of this crisis?

LFCG Episode 53

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: I have. I don't think that anybody in Congress has a different position. Everyone wants to do something. Some people want to do more than others, but everyone is united in holding Putin accountable and protecting our allies.

RICHARD: You both have been working on your committee to strengthen and improve how Congress works assuming that it isn't functioning very well right now. Make the case for why we need Congress to function, to work better.

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: Well, I'll say up front, it's strange to be part of an organization that, according to recent polling, is less popular than head lice, colonoscopies, and the rock band Nickelback. I think that's somewhat indicative of just the fact that, too often, the dysfunction in Congress impacts the American people. Listen, when we see, even outside of just the toxicity that often shows up on cable news that repels the American public, there are consequences, for example, when Congress is unable to pass a budget when we have a government shutdown or when we have, as we've had for years and years and years, what's called continuing resolutions where Congress basically kicks the can on federal spending. The consequence of that is really evident in a district like mine, where the largest employer is the United States Navy where you've seen shipyard workers get sent home when the government gets shut down.

There is a need, I think, and really the rationale behind the creation of this committee is something that happens basically every two or three decades or so. Congress realizes things aren't working the way they ought to, and they create a committee to try to do something about it, and this is the current iteration of that. The last one was in the early '90s. Our task is pretty simple but challenging, and that is make Congress work better for the American people.

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: I'll follow up on that. I think technology is really advancing the human civilization in incredible ways, but I think it's creating challenges. They didn't have these until 2000-something. It allows us to remove the relationships that we have. When you think about it, most members of Congress do not have substantial interaction with the opposite party, the vast majority of members of Congress. They can tweet mean things at each other and that is what replaced dialogue and conversations from decades ago.

So we're struggling with maintaining the relationships that are necessary to find common ground, and we've spent a lot of time on the committee trying to see how we can build relationships across the aisle with our colleagues to get back to that. I talk about evidence-based policymaking in a collaborative manner from a position of mutual respect. That's what we're supposed to do. We don't do that anymore, and so anything we can do to force people back into the room and use their inside voices and find a path forward, that's what I think this country and this Congress needs.

ASHLEY: You're members of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. Give us an example of something that you've done that could make a difference.

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: We've spent a fair amount of time looking at: how can Congress, as an institution, do a better job of recruiting, retaining and having more diverse staff that looks like the American people? We've worked on that in part because, under the status quo, there is dramatic turnover in this institution. The average tenure is about three years. The consequence of that is every few years, the institution basically self-lobotomizes and loses capability to solve big problems. Nature abhors a vacuum.

As an institution, that means we're either incapable of solving big problems or what fills that vacuum too often is paid lobbyists, which I would argue does not serve the best interests of the American people. So that's part of the reason we worked on these issues related to staffing. William held up his cell phone. Congress has been described as an 18th-century institution using 20th-century technology to solve 21st-century problems. That doesn't really work right now when we're dealing with all sorts of technological issues, everything from cyber security to: how do we protect people's privacy? And the institution needs to keep up with the times and currently isn't. So we've worked on that space, too.

Then, just to underscore the point that William made, one of the things that most bedevils this institution is just the inability of people to work together constructively. Too often, policy conversations resemble the Jerry Springer Show rather than constructive dialogue to try to actually solve problems for the American people. So we've tried to make some recommendations, to make some targeted interventions to try to make the place function better.

ASHLEY: Derek, your committee has an equal number of Democrats and Republicans. You agreed to a series of proposals for change, right?

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: We've so far passed over 140 bipartisan recommendations. About 75% from the Congress have either been implemented or have seen some meaningful action, and then we're on a pretty good clip to see implementation on a number of the recommendations that we've made this Congress, as well. We've been really intentional about the work that we've done. In part, we made a decision that if we could find agreement on recommendations, we would vote on them rather than just waiting until some end date. And, two, we wanted to make sure that we weren't just making recommendations, that we were making change. Some of it has also involved just doing things differently as a committee.

As you mentioned, Ashley, our committee's six Democrats and six Republicans. If you watch one of our hearings on C-SPAN, one, it probably means you have too much time on your hands. But if you watch one of our hearings on C-SPAN, you'll find a few things. One, we don't sit with Republicans on one side of a dais and Democrats on the

other. I don't know about you, when I hear something interesting, my genetic predisposition is to lean over to the person next to me and say, "Hey, that was kind of interesting." And in our committee, when you do that, you lean over next to someone from the other party.

RICHARD: So your hearings look different from the hearings of other committees. Rather than it being a usual kind of courtroom arrangement where you have members at daises making brief speeches, you have this roundtable. What kind of difference has that made to the dynamics of your discussion?

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: William, you want to take that?

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: Sure. It's changed everything. It has facilitated an environment of, I would go as far as to say, trust. We literally talk to each other. We exchange ideas. We do things that no other committee does. We don't go in order of seniority. We go in order of who has a question. We operate in a way where we're actually trying to figure out the best path forward as opposed to talking past each other. We're trying to do our job, and it's really been incredibly rewarding. We've all become friends, and we've made great progress.

RICHARD: Does that amaze you, though, that this isn't the normal way of doing things in Congress?

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: Yeah. We've made a number of recommendations at least encouraging committees to try to do some of the things or experiment with some of the things that we've done, the sort of approach to dialogue that William just mentioned. I don't know about you. I've never had a good conversation speaking to the back of somebody's head, which is why we thought, hey, let's ditch the dais because, by its nature, it puts us at a higher level than the witnesses that have come before our committee, which I think is kind of a bizarre dynamic. But beyond that, it means we're all talking to the back of each other's heads. So we've changed that up.

Too often, the approach in committees is members sort of pinball from committee to committee because the schedule means that you're in three or four committees at the same time. As a consequence, there's not a lot of listening that happens in committees, and we've made some recommendations to try to change that just with regard to schedule and calendar. But also, the consequence is even when members are there, they're there to make a five-minute speech to stick up on social media rather than to actually listen and learn.

If we want Congress to be a place that can solve big problems, that means members have to develop expertise on the issues that come before their committee. It means that committees need to be empowered to try to do more problem-solving, and it means we can't just talk past each other. We don't limit our members to five minutes. If they want to pull on a thread that a witness has mentioned, we say, "Hey, who wants

LFCG Episode 53

to pull on that thread?" And, as a consequence, we found just a lot more value out of the hearings that we've had. We've even done some other things that, frankly, people initially thought we were a little nuts.

ASHLEY: Like what?

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: Well, when our committee started, the first thing that happens is the committee gets its budget. In every committee in Congress, what then happens is some pretty simple math. Usually, they divide by two. Sometimes they divide even worse, with more money going to the majority than the minority. Then what happens is Democrats use their part of the money to hire people who have a Democratic background who put on blue jerseys, and Republicans hire people with a Republican background who put on red jerseys. Then they spend the rest of the time arguing with each other.

We decided not to do that. What we said is, "We don't have enough resources as a committee, and these problems are too big not to force multiply." So what we've said is, "Hey, how about this? Why don't we jointly hire people, and we'll make hiring decisions together. We'll hire some people who have a Democratic background and some people who have a Republican background, but they'll all put on a jersey that says Let's Fix Congress." As a consequence, we've got, really, a team that's trying to solve problems together rather than trying to find avenues to screw the other party.

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: It really has been incredible. We have a very talented team, and we're all like-minded, and we're working well together. It's just been impressive to see how this place is supposed to work.

RICHARD: Representatives William Timmons and Derek Kilmer talking about their work on the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress. Our podcast is Let's Find Common Ground. We aim to do that one episode at a time. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. We're members of Democracy Group, a podcast network that features conversations around reforming democracy. Here's a word about one of them, Democracy Paradox.

JUSTIN: Hello. This is Justin Kempf with a brief thank you for listening to Democracy Group network podcasts. I host Democracy Paradox, where I talk to scholars and thought leaders about democracy, democratization, and world affairs. This week's guest is the legendary, one-of-a-kind Moisés Naím. You can learn more about my podcast at democracyparadox.com or check out our other great shows in the network at democracygroup.org.

RICHARD: Now back to our interview with House Democrat Derek Kilmer and Republican William Timmons.

LFCG Episode 53

ASHLEY: Derek mentioned the staffing issue as being a real problem, something that needs to change. William, can you talk about another couple of things that maybe outsiders, average people would be really surprised to hear about that need fixing that you're hoping to fix?

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: Sure. Minimum wage in Washington, D.C. is \$15 an hour. You extrapolate that, it's 30-some-thousand dollars a year. We have a lot of people in Congress that work on the Hill that make less than that. So we don't abide by the rules of Washington, D.C. You have a lot of people that work on the Hill that have multiple jobs. D.C.'s extremely expensive. So it's just ridiculous that you're going to ask somebody to have two or three jobs or to live in what is basically impoverished conditions in order to work on the Hill. There's a lot of opportunity on the Hill, but it shouldn't be that way. So, hopefully, there's going to be an increase in the Members Representational Allocation which will allow members of Congress to pay their teams more. I think that will be a huge step.

We also have an exodus of top talent, and one of the recommendations we made that the Speaker's already implemented allows member's offices to pay their staff up to \$193,000, as opposed to, previously, they were capped at \$174,000. That's another great opportunity because if you're starting a family or you have a family, it's just really challenging. A lot of people who work on the Hill could leave and make double or triple. So we want to maintain the most talented people, and we want to make it easy for people to serve their country and their community by working in Congress as well as serving in Congress.

RICHARD: So, Derek, what about the broader issue of bringing more civility to Congress?

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: We've spent a fair amount of time looking at: how do you create a more collaborative workplace? When we decided to take on issues related to civility and collaboration, I confess most people said, "Good luck," and I got a lot of offers of prayer. But the committee brought in experts in organizational psychology, management consultants, folks who have expertise in conflict resolution negotiation, some sports coaches who took over dysfunctional teams. I thought about bringing in an exorcist to talk to us. But we were trying to figure out: how do you just make the place, one, function, and ideally function far more collaboratively than we see right now?

So let me give you an example of something we heard. I talked to a sports coach, and I said, "You took over a team that had a notoriously bad culture. How did you fix it?" And he said, "We fixed it focusing on the new members of the team, on the incoming freshmen. Then he asked me a question. He said, "How does Congress bring on incoming freshmen?" Do you know the answer to that? Literally from the beginning, it's tribal.

LFCG Episode 53

William tells a story about showing up at freshman orientation and being told, "Okay, Republicans get on that bus, and Democrats get on that bus." I think that may or may not surprise the American people. So one of the recommendations we have made as a committee is stop doing that. Let's make the orientation process one that's focused on civility and collaboration and having a functional institution rather than gang warfare.

RICHARD: Derek Kilmer, you are one of the leading proponents of a new bill about civility. Can you tell us more?

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: Yeah, and thankfully, Congressman Timmons is a co-sponsor of that bill, too. I'll tell you the genesis of it. We had a couple things happen in my district that I was pretty alarmed by. One, this Fall, we had, unfortunately, a series of attacks on religious institutions. The Islamic Center in Tacoma was burned to the ground. Two Buddhist faith leaders were beaten up at their temple. We saw vandalism at a couple of churches. And in the spirit of something good coming out of something bad, the interfaith community decided to hold a solidarity event to basically say we're going to have each other's back. It was really inspiring, and basically the message was that part of a strong, pluralistic democracy is that you have to be able to live next door to people who think differently and pray differently than you do and not have it turn into conflict.

Afterwards, one of the faith leaders came up to me and said, "That was a really good 90-minute conversation, but if we did this right, it'd be more than a 90-minute conversation. This would be something that we tried to do on a prolonged basis." And he said, "Just out of curiosity, is there any federal support for doing anything like that?"

I said, "No, not really, at least not currently." Then, in November or December, I got invited to one of my local YMCAs, thinking that they were going to talk to me about the fact that gymnasiums are losing money. That's not what they wanted to talk about.

They said, "All of the conflict, all of the polarization that you see in Washington, D.C., that we see on cable news has unfortunately infested our YMCA. We've literally had fights break out over pick your red or blue issue." They said, "It's become such a big problem we can't ignore it anymore. So we've actually decided to hire a consultant who's going to train our staff and train our board in conflict resolution. We're going to try to host some events to bring people together across differences." And then they said, "Just out of curiosity, is there any federal support for anything like that?"

And I said, "You know, not really." And at the same time, William and I are chairing this committee, and someone sent us a report from the National Academies called "Our Common Purpose" about strengthening American democracy. And Chapter Four of it is entitled "Strengthening Civic Bridge Building," and it makes the point that the United States, through the National Endowment for Democracy, spends tens of millions of dollars each year trying to promote social cohesion and build civic bridges to strengthen democracy in other countries, but it does none of that domestically.

So that was really the impetus for this bill that you mentioned, which is focused on setting up a new pilot program through AmeriCorps that would do grant-making to these hyper-local efforts to try to bring people together across lines of difference, also to train AmeriCorps participants in some of the skills related to civic bridge-building and even to support some of the research being done by colleges and universities in this space. We chose AmeriCorps in part because it has footprints in most of our communities, and I think anybody who's been involved in a service project or after a natural disaster knows that you're not checking party identification when you're working on a service project.

Beyond that, AmeriCorps is unique in that it's empowered under its statute to accept private philanthropy. So our hope is that, with a little bit of federal money, we might be able to leverage it into something that could really make a difference in our communities at a really polarized time. As Ken Burns has said, "Our national motto is E Pluribus Unum, and these days, it feels like we have a lot of pluribus but not a lot of unum." Hopefully, something like this could be helpful.

ASHLEY: William, do you have anything to add?

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: The same challenges we have in Congress, we have in everyday society. People are no longer connected in a way that they used to be. I do think technology's a lot to blame. Next time you go to have a meal somewhere, look at the table next to you. The four people sitting there are going to be sitting here like this.

ASHLEY: Bent over their phones.

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: We've lost the human relationships that have existed throughout human history, and we've got to find a way to overcome this. Again, I love technology. There's huge benefits, but I do think that we're having some growing pains, and I do think that we need to make sure that we remember human decency. Relationships matter.

RICHARD: Derek, you've mentioned the Building Civic Bridges Act, the need for it. What's in it?

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: I think one of the cool things about this bill, we introduced it with nine Republican sponsors and nine Democratic sponsors. I think there is a bipartisan understanding that we need to overcome this polarization. So the bill would create a new program within AmeriCorps that's focused on building relationships across lines of difference. It would focus on providing grants to those local entities that are doing this work on the ground in our communities: the local YMCA, the local interfaith organization that's trying to get past some of these differences that too often make it feel like we're tearing at the seams in our country. I'm not sure we're going to

LFCG Episode 53

solve all of that in Washington, D.C. Maybe this gets solved from the bottom up by these efforts in our local communities, by work being done by AmeriCorps participants.

That's part of the bill, too, is to train AmeriCorps participants in the skills related to civic bridge-building. Andy Barr, who's one of my colleagues from Kentucky, has in his district the Henry Clay Center at the university in his state that's doing research related to: how do we actually bring people together across lines of difference? How do you actually foster collaboration in a way that too often seems like a lost art right now in our country? So I'm hopeful that we'll see... Yeah, I was really pleased that we saw bipartisan support at introduction for this bill. I'm hopeful that we'll see some positive momentum and get it across the finish line.

ASHLEY: Before we go, you two are from opposite parties. How do you get along, and did you hit it off right away, or did it take some doing?

CONGRESSMAN TIMMONS: Well, I was originally the freshman member on the committee, and Derek was the chairman. He leads by example. He's the chairman of the committee, but he includes everybody. He makes sure everyone has input in the process, and I hate to say this, but I'm on Financial Services, and I don't think the chairwoman could pick me out of a lineup. That's not against her. If the Republicans were in the majority, I promise you that the Republican chairman would not know the freshman on that committee. It's a different world that we have created on the Modernization Committee, and we've developed mutual respect and friendship. It has been a very rewarding process.

CONGRESSMAN KILMER: I really appreciate the spirit that William brings to this committee and his embrace of this mission of just trying to make the institution function better. William tells a story about running for Congress under the theme of "Congress is broken, and we need to fix it." I think he's taken that approach. Listen, it's hard to do things differently in Congress. It's hard to do things differently in any institution, any organization when you say, "Hey, we're going to have joint staff," or, "We're going to do committee hearings in a way that's different." Every now and then, you get kind of a side glance. But I really appreciate William and, actually, all the members of our committee who have said, "Part of the way to make things function differently is do things differently." I'm very grateful for his partnership and his willingness to roll the dice and do things a little differently.

RICHARD: Derek Kilmer, Chair of the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress and Ranking Minority Member William Timmons.

ASHLEY: Let's Find Common Ground is produced for Common Ground Committee. Find out more about our podcasts, programs, and mission. Go to commongroundcommittee.org. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies, and thanks for listening.

LFCG Episode 53

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