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Climate Policy 2015: Reports from the Congressional Trenches

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Climate Policy 2015:

Reports from the Congressional Trenches

by Sharon Tisher and Peter Mills

While candidates for national office interminably and furiously debate what to do about ISIS attacks, immigration abuses, economic inequality, taxes, welfare reform, the national debt, and matters of considerably less gravitas, they fail to responsibly address the most significant challenge of our age: climate change.

We are lifelong members of our respective parties (one a Democrat, the other a Republican) who assert that remedies for climate change should be a dominant topic of political discourse. This threat should be taken just as seriously in 2016 as the war to dissolve the Union in the election of 1864 or the struggle against Axis powers in the election of 1944.

The year 2015 was alarmingly eventful. It was the globe's hottest year on record, greatly exceeding the previous six hottest years, five of which occurred in the last decade. The year ended with a remarkable concurrence of extreme weather across the United States. On Christmas Day in Portland, Maine, the temperature peaked at 62 degrees, eight degrees hotter than the previous record from 1994.

At the beginning of 2015, irrefutable evidence of the changing climate led the U.S. Senate to vote 98 to 1 to resolve "that climate change is real and not a hoax," but the Senate rejected a resolution proposing to find it significantly caused by humans.

Multiparty civil wars in Syria born in severe drought, dislocation, and unemployment have spawned terrorism

and the worst refugee crisis since World War II. In the encyclical letter "Laudato Si'—On Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis issued an imperative call to action on climate: "Obstructionist attitudes...can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity." He brought his message to Congress in an unprecedented address given at the invitation of House Speaker John Boehner.

President Obama finalized his Clean Power Plan to reduce carbon emissions from existing power plants.¹ Delegates from 195 countries convened in Paris to seize the "last, best chance" to forge a global plan to reduce greenhouse gases, hailed by some as the world's greatest diplomatic success (Friedman 2015). But opponents in Congress pledged to scuttle both the Clean Power Plan and the commitments made by our President at the Paris conference to reduce carbon emissions.

This issue strikes close to home. In February 2015, the Climate Change Institute of the University of Maine released its updated assessment of the impacts of climate change on Maine's weather, our ecosystems, and our resource-based economy (Fernandez et al. 2015). Findings in the report include the following:

- "Average annual temperatures across Maine warmed by about 3.0 °F between 1895 and 2014" (Fernandez et al. 2015: 2).

- "The spread of Lyme disease has been linked to temperatures that make habitat more suitable for deer ticks and their hosts. The rate of Lyme disease reached a record high in 2013 at...1,377 cases" (Fernandez et al. 2015: 5).
- "Two-thirds of Maine's plant and animal species are either highly or moderately vulnerable to climate change" (Fernandez et al. 2015: 5).
- "A significant increase in extreme precipitation events (more frequent and intense storms) has been observed across Maine" (Fernandez et al. 2015: 9).
- "A decade of above-average spring and summer precipitation patterns have fostered an epidemic of white pine needle disease, which is caused by one or more pathogenic fungi" (Fernandez et al. 2015: 11).
- "Snowfall has declined by about 15%" since the late 1800s (Fernandez et al. 2015: 10).
- "Since 1982, the average sea surface temperature [in the Gulf of Maine] increased at a rate of 0.05 °F...per year, slightly faster than the increase experienced by the global ocean....Since 2004, the warming rate has accelerated to 0.41 °F...per year, a rate that...[is] faster than 99% of the world's oceans" (Fernandez et al. 2015: 13).
- We have more and more flood zones along the Maine coast, resulting in increased costs for flood insurance and the need for essential property renovations (Fernandez et al. 2015:17).

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The report states that “human influence on the global climate system is emerging as the defining environmental, economic, and social issue of the twenty-first century” (Fernandez et al. 2015: 1).

Maine citizens agree. According to an article by Mary Pols in the *Portland Press Herald* (September 20, 2015), a clear majority of them (67 percent) understand the effects of global warming and are deeply concerned about its effects on Maine. As we pointed out in an article in the *Bangor Daily News* (December 24, 2013), our state has a long tradition of sending strong environmental leaders to Congress, people who have led national efforts to fashion essential legislation such as the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act.

How have our current Congressional representatives tackled the climate conundrum in 2015? One of our authors (Tisher) spoke recently with three of them. The results were impressive and in at least one respect surprising.

Senators Collins and King and Congresswoman Pingree all without hesitation endorsed the assessment of the U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that “it is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century” (Plattner 2013). Senator Collins wanted to “make clear that I don’t think human activity is the only factor influencing climate change, but it certainly is a significant factor.”

Senator Collins has observed firsthand the impacts of climate change at both extremities of the planet:

I follow this issue closely including taking trips to Antarctica where the University of Maine has graduate students and professors working...I’ve also been to the northern regions

of Alaska, to Barrow, and I’ve seen the changes with the melting of the permafrost and insects going further and further north and changing the fishing cycles and here in Maine the increase in Lyme disease that we’re seeing as a result of the increase in ticks is also attributable to climate change.

Our senators are among the most outspoken in Congress on climate science and the need for effective response. Senator King, a member of the Senate Climate Action Task Force, devoted his debut speech in Congress to the high risks of ignoring climate science, and in 2015 he delivered a floor speech echoing the Pope’s call for environmental stewardship based on fundamental moral precepts:

Some of the reaction has been that the Pope should stay away from science and stick to morality and theology....I’m here this morning to say I believe that’s exactly what he is doing....I have always viewed this issue in fundamentally an ethical and moral context....I’m convinced that the science is irrefutable—that A) something is happening; B) it’s detrimental to the future of the country—of the world; and C) we people are largely responsible for it. But fundamentally, this is a moral and ethical issue.²

Senator King has created a graphic that he calls “Climate Change in a Nutshell,” showing increases in CO₂ in the atmosphere over 800,000 years and the correlation between temperature and CO₂ for the same period—all on a little card that “I hand out to my colleagues now and then, who are unbelievers.” (See Figure 1).

In leading a panel discussion on climate in Portland sponsored by the Maine Conservation Alliance in February 2015, Senator Collins stated with a strong sense of urgency:

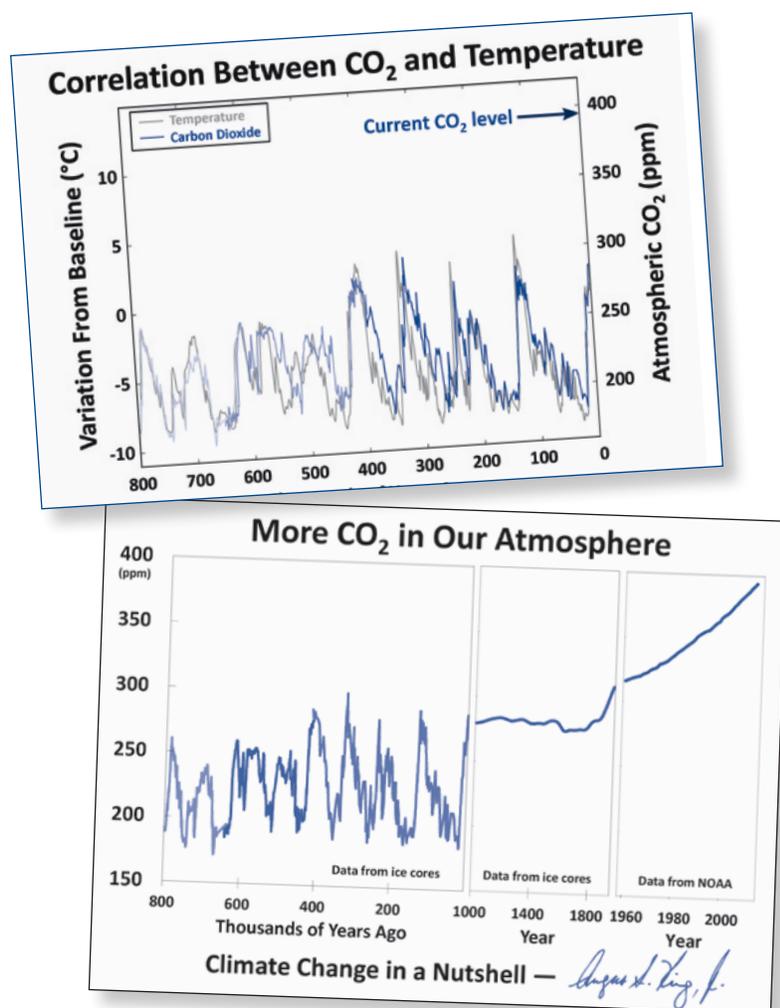
When we talk about this issue we need to relate it to peoples’ lives and that has been in my view the failure of the discussion of this issue....When scientists are talking about whether the planet is going to warm by 1.3 degrees or 2 degrees, it really doesn’t mean anything to people. When you hear from Bill [Mook] that the acidification is causing oysters not to be able to produce a shell...that affects jobs in this state.... Whether we invest in alternative energy, directly affects jobs in this state. When we hear Russell [Black] talk about the impact on maple sugar flows or when he brings in the hay, that again speaks to the heritage of our state....Then it becomes real.

Senator Collins concluded her remarks by saying, “I’ve always believed that it’s a false choice to frame this debate as the environment versus the economy. Here in Maine, the environment *is* the economy. From tourism and recreation, to our working forests, fishing, and agricultural industries.”³

Senators Collins and King and Congresswoman Pingree voted against the effort to kill the Clean Power Plan through a Congressional override under the rarely used Congressional Review Act (CRA). Senator Collins stood out as one of only three Senate Republicans to vote “nay.” Although the CRA resolutions passed both the House and the Senate, they did not survive the President’s veto.

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FIGURE 1: Senator King's "Climate Change in a Nutshell" Card



Senator Collins was one of five Senate Republicans to vote in favor of a resolution submitted in January stating that climate change is not only real, but significantly caused by humans.

Congresswoman Pingree voted in June against the "Ratepayer Protection Act of 2015," H.R. 2042, that would have substantially derailed the Clean Power Plan by suspending its effectiveness until resolution of certain lawsuits and by exempting states from compli-

ance whenever a governor certifies to EPA that implementation "would have a significant adverse effect upon: (1) the state's residential, commercial, or industrial ratepayers."

Senator King described his support for the Clean Power Plan as multifold: "One, because of what it will do substantively to move the country away from fossil fuel dependence for energy generation. Something like 32 percent of CO₂ emitted is from power plants, so it's a

logical area to control. The way the Clean Power Plan works is very decentralized, in the sense that it's not Washington telling Maine or Rhode Island or Texas how to get there, but just that this is where we're headed and you figure it out. Maine for example is already well on the way; therefore, I see very little impact in Maine in terms of employment and jobs. We don't have coal plants, we don't have coal mines, and that's where the principal impact will be.... In effect, RGGI [the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative] is the model for the Clean Power Plan. It's worked very well in New England and it's worked in Maine without any detriment to the economy."

"Secondly," King noted, "it's important in terms of international leadership. Of course the climate talks are going on right now. If we go into these talks as one of world's largest polluters, and say you've got to do things in China or India and by the way we're not doing much, we don't have any credibility.... Our ability to get China and India to take these steps would be severely compromised if we weren't doing it ourselves."

Our representatives are sponsoring laws to broaden understanding of greenhouse gas impacts (Congresswoman Pingree's Coastal Communities Ocean Acidification Act), promote decentralized and clean electricity generation (Senator King's Free Market Energy Act), and reduce the health and climate impacts of burning dirty fuels in developing nations (Senator Collins's Clean Cookstoves and Fuels Support Act). Senator Collins is a lead Republican cosponsor of the bipartisan Super Pollutants Act, which would establish a task force to develop strategies for controlling three short-lived climate pollutants—methane, black carbon,

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and hydrofluorocarbons. Though small in percentage of total greenhouse gases, these chemicals are responsible for as much as 40 percent of the effects of global warming. In one respect, however, Senator Collins departed from climate activists in cosponsoring and voting for the Keystone XL Approval Act. Senator King voted against this Act, which was ultimately vetoed and the override failed.

In the Republican-controlled House, Congresswoman Pingree noted that “I would say virtually everything [related to climate change] is defensive. I’m sorry to say that’s much of what I’ve been doing in 2015, particularly because I’m on the Appropriations Committee, and the group of Republicans that are climate deniers use the appropriations process as a way to attach riders onto the funding bills so that they can find a way to keep us more dependent on coal, block the Clean Air Act, defund the EPA....We’re about to have another fight in a couple of weeks about funding for the EPA. Basically we’re doing that all year long. Speaking against the riders, voting against the riders.”

All three are cautiously optimistic, however, about a shift away from partisan climate denial. In September, 11 House Republicans signed a resolution to fight climate change. In October, four Republican Senators formed a climate working group (Valentine 2015). Senator Collins: “I believe that more and more Republican members are seeing the impacts in their own state, particularly those who live in coastal states and are becoming increasingly concerned.” Senator King: “There’s a sense that the edifice of denial is crumbling and that we are finally getting to a place where we can say climate change is happening.”

But forging bipartisanship requires astute leadership at the top. Senator

Collins called it a “big mistake” when the Obama Administration invited 10 Congressional leaders to the Paris talks—all Democrats. We agree.

If voters should award Senators King and Collins and Congresswoman Pingree an “A” for their recent work on climate policy, a grade for Congressman Poliquin would be “incomplete.” He was unavailable for an interview and has not provided written answers to the questions posed. According to a post by Tiffany Germain on the Moyers & Company website (<http://billmoyers.com/2015/02/03/congress-climate-deniers/>), a comment in a 2010 campaign has caused him to be labeled a denier, and he has not clearly disavowed that view. He voted to override the Clean Power Plan under the CRA and voted for the Ratepayer Protection Act of 2015. His colleagues, however, characterize him as an enthusiastic participant in efforts to win federal dollars for energy efficiency and renewable power projects. Perhaps Congressman Poliquin is still on a learning curve on the impact of climate change and will soon endorse the need for effective action. It is crucial that he do so for Maine and for the world at large.

All four of our representatives earned an “incomplete” in one important respect: a failure to confer with each other about things that matter. When interviews were conducted in November and December 2015, none of our climate champions in Congress had discussed these issues with their newest colleague, Representative Poliquin. Senator Collins responded: “While Bruce and I talk quite frequently, he has not sought my advice on that issue, nor have we had any discussions at all.” Senator King acknowledged that he has not yet given his “Climate Change in a Nutshell” card to Congressman Poliquin.

Three of our representatives recognize the significance of climate change and have become experienced advocates on this issue. Because Congress will have a pivotal role to play in our nation’s response to this crisis, it is not too much to ask for our delegation to sit down, converse, and attempt to forge a “tripartisan” front on this dire threat.

Climate change is the defining issue of our time. The primary effects are already tangible and disturbing, but the future is scary. The secondary effects will include economic collapse, disease, social dislocation, and conflict in many of earth’s societies.

This crisis is also an opportunity. Prices for wind and solar energy as well as battery-storage capacity are falling more rapidly than people ever expected they would. Any nation that promotes the advancement of these technologies will lead the world in energy transformation.

Congress should act. Not only should they sustain long-range credits for renewable energies, they should put a price on carbon. And why not eliminate carbon fuel incentives that have long outlived their usefulness: the oil and gas depletion allowance; the domestic manufacturing tax deduction for drilling oil; the foreign tax credit for hydrocarbon producers; and the rapid write off for intangible drilling costs?

It is time to cast doubts aside. When leading scientists and diplomats from all the world’s 195 nations speak with one voice—adding in the Pope’s for good measure—how can they all be wrong? Mainers have special expertise in breaking logjams; let’s take those talents to Congress. 🐟

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A shorter version of this commentary appeared in the *Bangor Daily News*: Sharon Tisher, "How Collins, King, Pingree, Poliquin Scored on Climate Change in 2015." December 22, 2015.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Information about the Clean Power Plan is available on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's website: <https://www.epa.gov/cleanpowerplan/clean-power-plan-existing-power-plants>
- 2 More information is available in a press release on Senator King's website: "After Pope Releases Climate Encyclical, King Renews Call for Action on Global Climate Change." (June 18, 2015). <http://www.king.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/after-pope-releases-climate-encyclical-king-renews-call-for-action-on-global-climate-change>
- 3 Senator Collins remarks at the Maine Conservation Alliance panel discussion on Effects of Climate Change on Maine's Health and Economy (February 20, 2015) are available at the following website: <http://www.protectmaine.org/climate-change-roundtable/>

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