

America's Politics of Fantasy: Climate Change and the GOP

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Global Research, November 07, 2014

Region: [USA](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

Climate change and the GOP are different creatures. This is not necessarily due to the fact that the denialists rule the roost with iron hands, though there are some prominent ones. Some claim it is happening – they just aren't that bothered by it. It is the great shirking response to the nature of living. What does not affect us now is of no consequence. If the past is a foreign country, so is the future.

No one typifies this response more than Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who waved a chair at a hotel ballroom in Anchorage, Alaska and shouted that she was “the chairmaaaaaan!” The predicted Republican storming of the Hill on Tuesday night has landed Murkowski with that rather mismatched position: that of chairing the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

In what can only be seen as the black irony of politics, Murkowski's chair waving bravura was taking place at the same venue a climate change conference was being held at. The difference between contempt and ignorance is not always easy to pick.

The intriguing paradox of GOP philosophy lies in what it deems apocalyptic and cataclysmic. For the pious, the association is one with the afterlife and the Holy land, a sort of religious fruitiness best reflected in the antics of Glenn Beck. Punishments accrue when impurities start setting in, be there in policy or in the conduct of office. (This evangelical touch conflicts heavily with the more libertarian, secular bunch who see little reason to bring God into the messiness of life.)

But on the issue of climate change, which is the equivalent of bringing collapse and calamity upon earth, many of the Republicans are fairly indifferent, and, in some cases, even optimistic. Bucks are to be made. Natural resources are to be used. The earth is there as both object and subject. It would be a sin not to reap its bounty.

Part of this tactic of approaching climate change is a grand measure of mathematical fantasy, one that necessarily repels the journals, the monographs, and the reports of the scientific community. The rhetorical trick there is to simply suggest that not all scientists agree, which is tantamount to saying that a disagreeing congregation is bound to refute the existence of God.

Murkowski herself has no head for numbers, or anything remotely resembling data. It is questionable whether she even knows where Iceland is, given that she names it as having a naughty volcano that did, at some point in history, emit fumes with effusive fury. “The emissions that are being put in the air by that volcano are a thousand years' worth of emissions that would come from all of the vehicles, all of the manufacturing in Europe.”[1]

The figure, as pointed out by climate change specialist Michael Oppenheimer, is baffling. The Senator is evidently reversing the figures, with annual emissions of all volcanoes put together actually ten times less than those coming from European manufacturing.

What she does have a head for, and certainly hands, it would seem, is prosaic pragmatism. If there are problems – and yes, some change in climate is admitted to be taking pace, the best way of dealing with them, however earth shattering or melting they might be, is dig in and deny. “I mean, there is no way of getting around the pragmatic fact that we depend on fossil fuels for the majority of our state budget. We also experience the highest energy prices anywhere in the country.” Poor burdened Alaska, saddled by that need of being acutely pragmatic.

Astronomer Phil Pait, contributing writer to Slate (Nov 4), was gloomy at the prospect of having GOP climate change deniers in Congress. Having Republicans seize the Environment and Public Works Committee is tantamount to leaving a loved pet with an overly enthusiastic taxidermist. Expect the Environmental Protection Agency to be defanged, most probably by the blunt tools of Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe.

The senator certainly did get what he wanted after the Tuesday wash up. “Congratulations, Voters,” stormed the New Republic. “You just made this climate denier the most powerful senator on Environment.”[2] And Inhofe has stunning form, the sort of unintentionally bad comic act who finds himself actually making policy from the vestiges of the dark asylum. “It’s also important to question whether global warming is even a problem for human existence,” he claimed in 2003. “Thus far no one has seriously demonstrated any scientific proof that increased global temperatures would lead to the catastrophes predicted by alarmists.”[3]

Proof, it seems, lies in a very different pudding, and when it is found, it’s bound to be a “Soviet-style” product suggesting “ideological purity” – the terms he used to dismiss such bodies as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. For the senator, the whole climate change business is the “greatest hoax”. [4] And how odd it seems that such critics see hoaxes as having the colour of politburo red.

In any tangible sense, this ineffective Congress will take its side in history as being one of the United States’ most obstructionist and least constructive. The GOP victory, premised on the idea that Washington does not work, was largely based on the notion that Washington was made unworkable. You break a system in order to seek a vote to fix it. Consensus as a term was scrapped from the operating manual of political debate.

The machine of Washington politics is poorly greased as it is, and it is unlikely to move even with these mid-term results. As for climate change, the environment will simply go one way, while the GOP will go another. At no point are these two destined to meet, except in a mutual meeting of calamity.

Notes

[1] <http://www.npr.org/2014/11/06/361896179/republican-sweep-highlights-climate-change--politics-in-alaska>

[2] <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/120134/climate-change-denier-james-inhofe-lead--environment-committee>

[3] <http://www.epw.senate.gov/speechitem.cfm?party=rep&id=230594>

[4] <http://greatesthoax.com/>

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