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Carbon tax earns audience support at conservative forum

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By Corbin Hiar

Could Republicans ever back a tax on the carbon dioxide emissions responsible for global climate change? If the result of a debate about the concept among representatives of four conservative groups in Washington, D.C., is any guide, the answer is possibly yes.

At the end of an hourlong discussion on the evening of June 13, moderator Ronald Bailey, science correspondent for the libertarian magazine *Reason*, asked the audience to weigh in on the resolution that "under no circumstances should conservatives support a tax on carbon emissions." While a sizable number of supporters stood up first to support the notion, in a blog post Bailey estimated that about 60% of the crowd rose next in favor of a potential carbon tax.

One of the victorious debaters was shocked by the outcome. "If it looks like they've got a tree nearby and a rope, I had some people here with knives ready to cut me down," Bob Inglis, director of the Energy and Enterprise Initiative at George Mason University, jokingly told SNL Energy. "I was surprised, very, very surprised."

Inglis saw the RSVP list before the event and did not expect to receive a warm reception from the crowd, which apparently included many Republican congressional aides. "It's amazing the organizations that were coming. I think they sent some younger staff members," he said.

Bailey, who also saw the list, added that most of the people who had planned to attend "could be fairly characterized as leaning conservative or libertarian."

Who argued what?

Helping Inglis win over the crowd was Andrew Moylan, outreach director and senior fellow at R Street, a free-market think tank that co-sponsored the event. Moylan and Inglis made the case that a price on carbon was inevitable so it would be better for conservatives to use the revenue from a carbon tax to bring down the rates on personal income and corporations.

The other sponsor of the event was the Heartland Institute, a conservative group that R Street split from in May 2012 over disagreements about Heartland's staunch denial of climate change. Heartland sent James Taylor, a senior fellow and managing editor of *Environment and Climate News*, a climate-skeptic publication. He and David Kreutzer, an energy economics and climate change research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, countered that a carbon tax would be disastrous for the economy and would inevitably lead to a larger federal government.

Both sides agreed that a carbon tax would only make sense if it was implemented in place of EPA carbon regulations and was revenue neutral. But Taylor argued that such a scenario is akin to believing in "pixie dust." The audience clearly disagreed.

What does this mean?

That is a good sign for congressional proponents of a carbon tax, according to Inglis, who represented South Carolina in the House for 12 years before being ousted in 2010 over his belief in climate change. Inglis said he thinks it may be possible to pass a revenue-neutral carbon tax "once the pain of the Great Recession is gone."

"These ideas make sense. And it certainly is a creative alternative to what is otherwise the plodding growth of government through EPA regulation, which is the most ineffective way to do this," he said.

Despite voting against the landmark 2009 cap-and-trade climate bill, Inglis is genuinely concerned about global warming. But the former congressman is also worried about how he thinks Democrats are attempting to leverage the threat. "Liberals ... tell it as a huge problem — we're all going to die. And then they ram through some regulations and a tax increase and grow the nanny state," he said. "So it's natural for conservatives to recoil from that."

That should not be the case, according to Inglis. The Energy and Enterprise Initiative and R Street are conservative voices that are "trying to change the conversation," he said. "We're not talking apocalyptic visions. We're talking reasonable risk avoidance. There's risk — the science indicates risk. Our friends in the casualty insurance industry know it and are pricing that risk. So let's follow their lead."

Scientists welcome the help

While few climate researchers would describe global warming as an apocalyptic threat, most agree that it poses some very serious risks. "A large meteor hitting the planet: that's apocalyptic," Aaron Huertas, a spokesman for the Union of Concerned Scientists, said by way of comparison. "Climate change isn't going to eliminate all life on earth, but it is going to make life on earth very hard for a lot of human beings."

Without immediate moves to curb climate change, humanity looks to be headed toward a much warmer and less hospitable planet. A [recent analysis](#) of greenhouse gas emissions trends by the International Energy Agency, an independent body set up by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, found that global emissions of energy-related greenhouse gas emissions reached a record high in 2012, setting the world on course for an average temperature increase of as much as 9.5 degrees Fahrenheit.

Although Inglis is advocating for more gradual action on climate change, he is also helping create the political conditions for such efforts to succeed, said Huertas, who also attended the event. Right now, people view global warming "from the lens of ideology first," he said. "That is what's making it harder for them to see the

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- Reason: About 60 Percent of Conservatives Favor
- Huffington Post: R Street Institute, Heartland Insurance Spin-off, 'Will Not Pro...
- New York Times: Republicans Learn the Perils of Being Politically Incorrect on C...

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science."

"I found a lot of value in that debate because we need to surface a lot of these tensions to be able to deal with them," Huertas said. "Bob Inglis is a guy who absolutely wants to do that. More people need to hear from him because we need more voices from across the political spectrum coming up with ideas about, how do you actually deal with this?"

The debate evidenced a fundamental conservative disagreement about climate change, according to Huertas, a former staffer for Rep. Jim Saxton, R-N.J. Conservatives are asking themselves, he said, "Do we even want to play ball around this issue at all, or do we want to just say no as hard as possible?"

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