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Q&A Joe Aldy

Climate strife and political life

Joe Aldy was special assistant to President Barack Obama for energy and environment, and represented the White House during climate negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009 and in Cancún, Mexico, in 2010. He stepped down last December and now teaches public policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As a climate debate shapes up in the House of Representatives, he offers Nature some perspective on the legislative battle ahead.

What effect is the Republican majority in the House of Representatives having on climate policy in Obama's administration?

House Republicans want to strip the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of its climate regulatory authority and cut clean-energy and climate funding. Some of this may be theatre, but it could drive hard negotiating positions over the budget and even shut down the government if no agreement can be reached. International climate funding could be a casualty, with a compromise delivering less than the administration's budget request and less, even, than what some conservative groups support.

How far can the administration go with the EPA regulations?

The EPA can make some progress in reducing

emissions through the Clean Air Act, but the act is not well designed for tackling climate change. The president has established ambitious long-term climate goals, and if the country is going to meet those in a cost-effective manner, I think we need legislation.

How should the administration move forward in the face of Republican opposition?

I'm cautiously optimistic that this Congress can move some form of climate-relevant legislation. If the administration can secure a meaningful clean-energy standard in the power sector, then I think it makes sense to exchange it for EPA regulatory authority. A good clean-energy standard could potentially remove the need for additional regulations.

Could the White House have pushed harder to pass climate legislation last year?

Part of this is a function of where Congress is and what Congress wants to do. In the previous Congress, the House moved forward with energy and climate first. If the Senate had done so, I think the president could have pushed it over the finish line and secured a bill. It probably would have meant that the clock would have run out for health care.

What message do you take from the climate bill's failure?

It is important that legislation is kept simple and transparent. A very complicated bill could undermine what the administration is trying to achieve in terms of driving investment in new energy technologies.

What were your thoughts when a deal struck between the United States and several key nations at the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks did not win broader support?

There is no doubt that the UN plenary was a painful process to watch. It was frustrating to know that an agreement was reached between more than 25 heads of state representing every major economy and every group in the UN negotiating process, and yet the agreement was still being derided as illegitimate and grossly inadequate. And although there was more that the administration would have liked to secure in the deal, it certainly beat having nothing. This is one reason why the meeting in Cancún was important, because a deal was struck there that incorporates all of the major elements that the world leaders agreed to in Copenhagen.

What are those elements?

First, that developed and developing countries are standing side by side to reduce their emissions. Second, that there is serious support for those who are the poorest and the most vulnerable to a changing climate. And third, there is an agreement that will establish how the world is going to review, analyse and consult on all of the major mitigation actions that the major economies are taking. This will make it easier to figure out what policies work, which I think is very, very important.

Kyoto Protocol commitments by industrialized nations will run out next year. Does Kyoto have a future?

Kyoto doesn't necessarily disappear, but the idea of splitting the world into developed and developing economies on this issue seems destined to disappear. More than half of emissions are coming from the developing world. If we don't adjust to that, then everything we are negotiating and all of the actions that will be driven by these negotiations will be inadequate to the challenge of climate change. ■

INTERVIEW BY JEFF TOLLEFSON