

PLENTY

IT'S EASY BEING GREEN

The New Green Machine

Environmental pundit Phil Brick's eco predictions for the next two years and beyond. By Brandon Keim



Whitman College environmental law professor Phil Brick hasn't always been nice to Republicans. (Asked his favorite meal by a journalist, he responded, "I like to eat Republicans. True, they pretty much taste like \$@#!....") But the recent Democratic victory has him feeling giddy, if not downright cooperative.

What can we expect in the next couple years?

A political climate change. There's a new House and Senate, an end to a single party rule that was openly hostile to environmental ideas.

Can the Democrats stay green, now that they'll get big-industry money again?

Of course not. Take Barack Obama and Tom Harkin from the midwest, pushing corn-based ethanol, which isn't actually carbon-neutral at all.

But there will be an interesting nexus between concerns about energy security, national security and climate change. Throughout the nineties, conservatives could say that environmentalists were standing in the way of

progress. They could say, "We didn't win the Cold War to make the world safe for organic vegetables." Now you can't dismiss alternative energy or climate change. They're integral to our security. Recasting those issues in that light puts the environment in a favorable position.

I think we're going to see climate change legislation coming out of congress in the next two years. After all, if you're an oil or auto company executive, who would you like to sign a bill -- George Bush, or an unknown?

What are the chances of the legislation having substance?

At this point, almost any bill will be good, if only for international political reasons. We can't even begin to have a conversation with anyone without being laughed out of the room, much less enter into negotiations about long-term climate emissions.

And once you sign a bill, it becomes impossible to say the problem doesn't exist. The James Inhofe's are taken out of the equation. They become the crazy aunt in the corner.

Then, once you have legislation, the question becomes, how will we strengthen it? What will the program involve? To get out of congress it will have to be bipartisan in some way. It will probably involve some kind of cap-and-trade system. Market-based initiatives can be an excuse not to get things done, but they can work.

What about state-level climate change legislation?

It's already happening. And when you reach enough states, you almost force the federal government's hand.

Could state and federal initiatives be blocked by conservatives?

I worried a lot when all three branches were under a single party, but look what's off the table. We have a lot to celebrate.

The best is always the enemy of the good. I hope the Democrats will figure out that they can get a lot of cool stuff done if they work with Republicans. The Democrats have a big incentive to show they can get the real work of government done -- and there's a sense that all they need to do is reach the middle of the Republican party, where there are plenty of good people, to achieve a working majority.

For the first time in a while, environmentalists can reach out and work across constituencies. Take drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: labor in Alaska backed away from the environmentalists, because it would have created blue-collar jobs. Now labor can sense that there are jobs in

alternative energy. Someone has to put up the windmills, the solar roofs, the solar hot water heaters. That's a good example of the way the climate can help us build coalitions.

Greens are often pretty self-satisfied. I'd invite them to engage in some hardball politics. Go out, find out who your friends are in business and labor, make some unlikely conservative friends, and kick some butt.

Posted by Kiera Butler on Jan 12, 2007 at 01:30 PM

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