

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

**“Climate & Energy in the 117th Congress: A
Conversation with Rep. John Curtis”**

DATE

Wednesday, March 2, 2022 at 8:30 a.m. ET

FEATURING

Representative John Curtis (R-UT)

Chairman, Conservative Climate Caucus; Member, House Energy and Commerce Committee

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By
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Joseph Majkut: Good morning. Welcome to CSIS. For our colleagues who are joining us from far-flung locations, good afternoon and good evening. My name is Joseph Majkut, and I'm the director of the Energy Security and Climate Change Program here at CSIS.

And I'm very happy to welcome Representative John Curtis, who represents the Third District of Utah in the United States House of Representatives, for a conversation this morning which I hope can cover enough ground to really allow him to talk about the excellent work that he's done and for us to address the major issues of the day. Mr. Curtis has taken a leadership position over the last few years in trying to – I hesitate to put words in your mouth, sir, but carve out a new style of approaching the challenges that we face as a country and as a world regarding the risks of climate change and the need to meet energy security and energy demand needs around the world.

For our conversation today, it's supposed to be relatively informal. This is a 30-minute coffee chat. If guests have questions that you'd like to submit via Zoom, I encourage you to do so. I'll happily incorporate them as appropriate on a rolling basis, as opposed to having a Q&A at the end.

Mr. Curtis, there's so much going on I'd like to dive right in. Last night, we watched the State of the Union. The president spent a lot of time addressing the Russian invasion of the Ukraine. This is – this is starting to have a serious impact on global energy markets. And I know that you've just come back, in your role as the leader of the Conservative Climate Caucus, from Europe on a – on a study trip. So maybe we can start there. You know, what's your – what did you learn on your trip? And what did you take from visiting our European neighbors as they're kind of in a moment of crisis?

Representative John Curtis (R-UT): Yeah. Joseph, first of all, it's a delight to be with you this morning and a real honor, so thank you for having me on.

Dr. Majkut: The honor is ours, sir.

Rep. Curtis: The trip was fascinating. We started before the war, so we were there for the week starting Monday. And then we were there during the outbreak of the war and we were there for a week, and literally saw a couple of things: a shifting of attitude and also what – some of the consequences of the decisions that were made in Europe many, many years ago. And let me just give you one quick example.

We were in Brussels. And 20 years ago, Belgium made a commitment to close their seven nuclear plants. Those seven plants were responsible for

approximately 50 percent of their energy. When they closed them 20 years ago – or made that decision; they’ve been closing throughout that time – they felt like, hey, 20 years is plenty of lead way to have new technologies, new sources in place, so let’s go ahead and make that commitment. In 2025, they’ll face a winter with zero nuclear and now a mass dependence on their enemy for a fossil fuel, right? And that’s what’s, like, heartbreaking, is, yeah, these decisions that were made with very good intent have put them in a very vulnerable place and increased their reliance on a fossil fuel.

Now, that being said, let me tell you what I saw that was very, very impressive, and that is that they’ve turned the corner on hydrogen. And I think at least here in the United States the way I talk about hydrogen is it’s – hydrogen, it’s kind of an emerging technology with a lot of promise. They’re implementing hydrogen. I went to a steel plant that runs on hydrogen and – green hydrogen. And they’ve made a commitment to reduce emissions by 55 percent by 2030. They’ve put it into law. And so the consequences are high enough that people are making investments of a substantial nature to speed them along that curve. So some really good things and some things that are a little bit scary.

Dr. Majkut:

As you were there and talking to European colleagues and friends and allies, what was – you know, what was the temperature when they were thinking about how to meet this energy challenge, right? So here at CSIS we’ve covered a lot of the – you know, the challenge of getting Europe off of Russian gas. The economics are just really good. It’s hard to sort of increase imports of LNG, in part because that market’s already working close to its capacity and it takes a few years to spin it up. Now, when you were talking to them, what did they see on the horizon as ways to manage those risks?

Rep. Curtis:

You know, interestingly, let me just share one fact with you and then answer your question. I was stunned when I found out 15 years ago – it’s not very long ago – 15 years ago, Europe produced more natural gas than Russia, and that’s a sobering thought. But they have all – what’s interesting is we didn’t find people who disagreed with these decisions that they’ve made. They’re committed. The level of commitment across party lines was very staggering to me.

We met with a former Romanian president and the parliamentarian from Poland, both very heavy coal countries, both experiencing the same things our coal country is experiencing. So they were – they were deeply concerned, but committed, right, to this 55 (percent) by 2030. And that’s what I found fascinating, is that they had been able to cross political divides to make goals and resolutions and incur great sacrifice. Their utility rates are up 400 percent in Europe before the war, and we know the war will increase those more dramatically. And so they’ve not only gotten buy-in from politicians; they have buy-in from constituents paying a thousand dollars to heat their

home. So that's something that it was actually pretty admirable that I don't see us duplicating here.

Dr. Majkut: At least not in the near term, right? That –

Rep. Curtis: Right.

Dr. Majkut: Now, maybe we should move that direction. You know, one of the challenges that we face in the U.S. is that climate, unlike for our European allies, has been a challenging political issue. Not saying it's unchallenging in Europe, right, but it's a – it's an issue that's been very divisive over the last 20 years. Didn't start that way if you look back at the history of Congress and policymakers taking climate change into account. The first Bush administration was very serious about approaches to climate change, but then it got to a place where it was hard to have a constructive conversation. My impression is that you're trying to lead an effort with this caucus on the House side to unstick American political approaches to climate change. Would you share with our audience a little bit about what you're doing with this caucus and where you see it going?

Rep. Curtis: Well, I think one of the greatest compliments you could give me is that I'm trying to unstick – (laughs) – right, this logjam that we have.

Listen, I believe strongly in my heart that we're born with this innate desire to preserve and protect this planet. Yet, we get off track, right? What causes us to get off track? And I believe there's a number of reasons, but I'll point to extremism on, quite frankly, both sides, right and left.

So on the right we've got denial, right? We've got refusal to consider proposals. And everything is – we just – we're very, very good at saying what we don't like, and we've done nothing to promote our own ideas and put forward suggestions ourselves, and that's very damaging.

On the left – and I – by the way, I can't do this without offending both the right and the left, so I'll just apologize right upfront, right? (Laughs.) I'm an equal opportunity offender. But it's this extremism that almost borders on religion, right, and doesn't always focus on the end goal – to me, the end goal is reducing worldwide greenhouse gas emissions – but instead it takes on social issues.

And let me give you a really good example: fossil fuels, right? So there is a role for fossil fuels in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We could spend a whole hour on that. And yet, there are many who just cannot stand the use of fossil fuels. Even, you know, if it is a temporary measure, they just can't stand it. And so I think that Republicans are turned off by that. The solutions sometimes are what I call take the head off to fix the headache, right? And so

the Republican response to that has been to just not engage and that then leaves the impression that we don't care and that we deny the science, two terrible things for us as a party, right? Not good, right?

And my mission is to change that. My mission is to show that we do care, that we do have ideas, that we want to sit at the climate table and debate our ideas, right? Let's have a thoughtful discussion about nuclear, let's have a thoughtful discussion about the role of fossil fuels, and let the best ideas survive and rise to the top. And unfortunately, we're really just getting ideas from one side – right? – and the other side is silent. So my mission is to get Republicans comfortable – we're not comfortable talking about climate – to get us comfortable talking about it, to get us comfortable debating, in very thoughtful ways, solutions, and I think we can bring a tremendous amount to the table.

Dr. Majkut:

Let me ask just for, you know, your perspective on what do your colleagues want to hear? Right? So as I've heard you describe your efforts and seen it and I've been to the website, you know, part of it is an educational function, right? And I think, you know, on any challenging issue we all know how to – within our group, with our close peers how to have a challenging or open conversation, but for those of us out in civil society, in the idea factories, you know, what is it that they're concerned about when they're approaching this issue? And what kind of information, what kind of new research can we help develop that will inform stronger positions or better and more – I don't want to say progressive in this context – more productive conversations?

Rep. Curtis:

You know, I've spent a lot of time on this and I'll just brag for a minute. We've been successful in getting 75 House Republicans to join the caucus. That's a third of all House Republicans. It's near one of the largest caucuses right now in Washington, D.C. How did we do that? How did we get Republicans to sign up for a caucus that states that the climate's changing and man's had some influence on it? And I think the answer is to take people where they are, and too often I think in the climate movement we demand that you are where I'm at on this or I'm going to shame you – right? – or I'm going to embarrass you, right? Well, that doesn't make people want to engage. We have this terrible problem that anything somebody does towards the climate is never enough, right? So instead of saying, ah, that's awesome – right? – that's awesome, we say, oh, that's all you did? (Laughs.) Right? And that turns people off.

And quite frankly, I was blessed, as I started to evaluate my position on the climate, to be surrounded by a number of people on the left, Democrats, who took me where I was, who applauded very, very small things that I did, and that made me want to do more, right? Ooh, yeah, they taught me – right? I mean, and too often it's just this black or white, and we use this litmus test of do you believe the climate's changing, do you believe man's responsible? Yes/no, black/white. If you don't, you have no credibility, you can't be part of

the discussion, and so I frequently try to tell Republicans, look, first of all, just answer the stupid question; it's not that hard of a question, right? The climate's changing; we've had some influence on it; get over it, right? Get past the question. But to my friends on the left, I want to say, look, stop asking the question, right? It's not a productive question. A better question is, will you join me in making sure we leave this planet better than we left it, better than we found it, right? Of course we will, right? And so I think that's where we start to get off track.

Then the second thing is I think we just immediately go to our areas of disagreement, and I'm here to tell you: Our areas of disagreement are "this" big and our areas of agreement, right, like, are "this" big, but this natural tendency to go straight to the areas where we have disagreement. And I'll tell you – I mean, I hope we have time to talk about the number of areas where we agree; they're vast, right, and places where we can work together. And so my feeling is look, take people where they're at on this. I've got members of this caucus who – well, they come but they won't join the caucus, right, because they're uncomfortable being associated with it. I'm fine with that. You come to my meetings because I know if you come, sooner or later, you're going to feel comfortable talking about climate. I'll take you where you're at, right? And that's good enough for me. The fact that you want to come to my meetings is all I need, right? And then you deal with this in your own way and work through it and I'm going to help you work through it. And my experience is if people are exposed to the facts, the situation in a non-threatening way, they always move on this continuum towards a better steward. Who doesn't want to be a better steward? They don't know how, right? And we just need to help people move along that continuum and be happy with any progress that they make.

Wow, I went probably way too long on that answer. But I've seen it – I've seen it way too many times go wrong.

Dr. Majkut:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, so I have been – I have been in this field for almost a decade now and I've even seen it go wrong a couple of times. (Laughter.) You know, maybe we should sit there for a moment and talk about, you know, that this is an issue for President Biden. This is a highlight issue for President Biden, right, reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

I think that the administration did a really good job returning U.S. to COP and focusing on a variety of policy implements that they could do, building coalitions of the willing, for instance, around methane emissions, around steel and shipping and what are sometimes called hard to abate, but a friend in the administration reminded me are must-abate sectors. And there, I think, really, taking a – you know, there was evidence of a really mature and productive conversation. You were there, too, right. What was – you know, when you came away from that international conversation focused on

climate change, what did you see as being possible and do you think there is grounds for us as a country to have a more stable, externally-facing approach to climate change as we're dealing with our peers?

Rep. Curtis: Yeah. I'm going to give you, like, a yes and a no, right. (Laughter.) On our current trajectory, I'd say no, right? We're just not headed towards that type of a productive outcome. But I also feel like we're incredibly close, right? Just some fine tuning in the way that we're talking about it and the way that we're addressing it, I think, could dramatically change that.

Listen, I could lay out a path to a green 2050 and I'm going to bet there's not a person that's listening to this that wouldn't agree with 80 percent of it.

Dr. Majkut: You're welcome to do so if you'd like.

Rep. Curtis: (Laughs.) OK.

Dr. Majkut: Proud of you if you'd take it.

Rep. Curtis: Yeah. So, look, you know, it's got to have a nuclear base, right? One of the huge mistakes that I've seen over in Europe is they don't talk about baseload, right, and so then they find themselves in a panic, raising rates 400 percent, probably much more than that by the time this is done, because they're not willing to concede that we need a baseload. We need a baseload. Businesses have to know that when they flip the switch power comes on.

We can do that with nuclear, and I'm not talking about our parents' nuclear. I'm not talking about the type of nuclear, right, that - our current plants. I'm talking about new generation nuclear. I'm talking about molten salt, you know, technologies that are safe and deal with the waste.

So, A, I put that out there as a major, major piece of a green 2050. And then I'd go big on renewables, right? Republicans are OK with renewables, right? It's not - it's just that only dependency on - being only dependent on renewables is a problem. I'd go big on renewables, and then I'd have a major component - this is what I learned from Europe - of taking those renewables in their excess time and converting them to hydrogen.

Do you know in the Northwest they get in periods of time when they have so much hydropower that they have to pay people to take energy? Like, we can convert that to hydrogen, right? I mean, and this - I was in Scotland for Glasgow. You mentioned that. I sat with the president of Scottish Power and he bragged - he said, we're a hundred percent renewable. I said, my goodness, how did you do that? He said, we have so much wind. We have way more wind than we need. And I said, well, what do you do when the

wind doesn't blow? And he said, well, we import natural gas – (laughter) – from our enemies.

And so the fly right there is, right, it's the storage, right, of renewables. And so, A, hydrogen and battery storage, we've got – we've got to refine that, and that's got to be a major piece, right, of this renewable piece of that. And then so this – and this is, I'll tell you, probably the – where we're going to disagree, right, with some people, but this is where I'd like a really thoughtful debate.

Why are we ruling out fossil fuels? If I can give you carbon sequestration of a fossil fuel and be net neutral with a fossil fuel, why are we ruling it out? And I think we need to have a really thoughtful discussion about a role of fossil fuels, not as a temporary role but a permanent role, if we get to carbon neutral, right, on them.

And so I think that would be a piece of my proposal, and all of a sudden a green future doesn't look that far away. But when we eliminate major components of that – and let me go back to Scotland, right? When you just have wind – you don't have storage, right, you don't have a baseload – it's hard to look at people in the eye and say, we're going to get to the point, right, where we are truly – not just, like, at times a hundred percent renewable. No, we're a hundred percent renewable, and, you know, I think what I've tossed out is not highly controversial, right? And that this is – those are the type of thoughtful discussions that we should be having about what does 2050 look like. And, quite frankly, what decisions do we need to be making today, if nuclear is a piece of it.

It takes a decade to permit a nuclear plant, at best. Probably longer than that. So we got to make these decisions now. We've got to fix this permitting problem for nuclear. We've got to – we've got to figure out storage for renewables. That's a barrier. But I see hydrogen as a strong possibility for that, and I think batteries will continue to improve, and that we'll be able to use battery storage more and more, and what is the role of fossil fuels. Can we have a debate without being, you know, villainized, right, because we don't want to take fossil fuels off the table?

Dr. Majkut:

So last year the president and Congress were able to pass the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which was a huge package. But it actually addresses some of the things you just talked about, right? Pretty substantial investments out of DOE for hydrogen technology, programs that they're spinning up now, carbon capture and direct air capture as well. That's a – you know, is that a model for how we should be working going forward? And do you think, you know, the president has a climate strategy that's focused on a budget bill? It's become relatively partisan. You know, what's the outlook for continuing to make changes on the margins, like what we saw in

the – let's just – we'll contain ourselves to the energy provisions of the infrastructure bill.

Rep. Curtis: Yeah. If I had a magic wand, I would change a couple things about the way we're looking at this right now. I don't think we have agreed on the end outcome. What does the end outcome look like? In Europe you see the vast sacrifices they're making for the changes – you know, the 400 percent utility rate increases. And yet, if Europe is 100 percent successful with its goals and we're not, and China's not, and India's not, and Russia's not, who cares, right? I mean, I don't really mean that, but that's kind of the case, right? We won't have accomplished anything if any individual country accomplishes their goal.

So I think we need to define the goal as worldwide greenhouse gas emission reductions. And substantial, right? Not like, oh yeah, we're going to lower it, right? But, like, right, substantial reductions of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions. That is the goal. Let's be more specific. Like, exactly how much do we want to reduce? And then I'd like to see us put together a plan not too different than I just articulated. I'm not so proud that it has to be my plan, but this vision of what that looks like, right? So right now we're throwing up charging stations on freeways, but we don't have the grid to support those charging stations. If we had the grid, we don't have the electricity.

And so sometimes I think when we don't start with end in mind, we're going to spend money and it's not going to be as coordinated as I'd like to see it. I'd like to see us just really laser focused on here's the goal. Here's how we've agreed we're going to get there. Sure, we need to be flexible, because technologies are going to come along, fusion, right. Technologies are going to come along through this. So we can pivot. But based upon what we know today, this is what it looks like. Therefore, when I spend money, I'm putting this building block in, I'm putting this building block in, and you can see what I'm building.

Dr. Majkut: Excellent. So let me – let me pose one final question, because I think you need to go about the business of your day. What's the venue for that conversation, right? Is it next Congress? Is it this Congress? The president has—the White House wants to publish a National Climate Strategy. Is that the venue that we should be starting to have these conversations in?

Rep. Curtis: You know, I'm going to – I'm going to give you a terrible answer. (Laughs.)

Dr. Majkut: That's fine.

Rep. Curtis: I don't know. This is what I know. I know what my role is. My role is to get Republicans to that venue, to get Republicans at the table. And I'm working as hard as I can to prepare us to be thoughtful members, putting our ideas

forward, telling you what we like, telling you what we don't like about what you've put forward, how can we fix that? And I feel like that is why we've been – one of the reasons – there's others. But one of the reasons we've been unable to make progress is because half of us are not there.

Nothing in this country is ultimately successful with only half of us, right? I've got to get the other half at the table so that we can come together on what we agree with, we can debate what we disagree with. And that's – like, everyday that's what I wake up and say, you know, what? I've got to get us in. And what's stunning to me and those around me is actually how quick that's coming together and how soon we're ready for that dialogue. And I just need to get all – not just the 75, but all of our members thinking about this, comfortable talking about it, and ready for thoughtful discussions.

And then, quite frankly, I think the answer to your question is a president of the United States has to lead, right? He has to bring both groups to the table. He can't do it just with one. He's got to bring us both to the table, broker these thoughtful conversations that I'm talking about, making decisions, and moving forward. And I think when we do that the American people will be ready to do what they're doing in Europe, which is make the sacrifices we need to make, which I don't think have to be that great. But they've got to – we've got to have buy in, right, up from them, and that's what I'd like to see happen.

- Dr. Majkut: Let me thank you for your efforts working on these tough and seemingly intractable but making progress issues. To the extent that me and my colleagues at CSIS can play a helpful role and all of us in our joint audience today can help you in your efforts, we hope that we can do so. Providing the venue for these conversations is an important part of our mission, and we thank you very much for joining us today.
- Rep. Curtis: Joseph, thank you. I hope we can do it again.
- Dr. Majkut: Yes. Have a good day, sir, and thank you kindly.
- Rep. Curtis: Thanks to all of you.