



Summer 2019

“We Have to Talk About Climate”

Gina McCarthy

Harvard T.H. Chan, School of Public Health

Recommended Citation

Gina McCarthy, “We Have to Talk About Climate”, 59 Nat. Resources J. 245 (2019).

Available at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol59/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources Journal by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

Gina McCarthy¹

“WE HAVE TO TALK ABOUT CLIMATE”

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO SCHOOL OF LAW

APRIL 25, 2018

INTRODUCTION

By Ann L. Brethour, NRJ Submissions Editor

In April 2018, Administrator Gina McCarthy, who ran the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) under President Barack Obama from 2013-2017, honored the University of New Mexico School of Law by speaking to a gathering of lawyers, students and community members about the role of lawyers in protecting the environment. Our symposium focused on “Hot Topics in Environmental Law,” which was also the central issue in Administrator McCarthy’s message. The editors of the Natural Resources Journal are pleased to share Administrator McCarthy’s poignant speech with our readership.²

Administrator McCarthy spoke of the need to protect the environment for future generations, and how that need was hampered by a communication gap between the “experts” and the general public. She spoke of a “war on science” now manifesting itself in agency deregulation and of the increased threat to clean air and clean water. Importantly, she talked about how solutions to the issues we face should begin at a grassroots level, and then move up the ladder to a federal solution.

Critically, she discussed solutions to the problems we face today, focusing on communication between the scientific experts, legal experts, and individuals on the ground. We hope this edition of the Journal helps to identify some of the issues we are

1. Prior to her work as EPA Administrator, Gina McCarthy served as the environmental adviser to five Massachusetts governors, and as commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection from 2004 to 2009. She also served as the 13th Administrator of the EPA from 2013 to 2017. She has also served as a Richard L. and Ronay A. Menschel Senior Leadership Fellow at the Harvard School of Public Health. She joined Pegasus Capital in 2017 to advise on sustainability and wellness investments, and most recently, in January 2018, was appointed Professor of Public Health in the Department of Environmental Health and Director of the Center for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (Harvard C-CHANGE).

2. Views expressed in this essay reflect those of Ms. McCarthy alone, and are not necessarily official views of the UNM School of Law.

facing today and solutions to the same. As you read through the articles herein, please keep Administrator McCarthy's thoughts on communication and working together in mind.

We live in uncertain times. I have to confess that I spend many hours worrying about all the great people at EPA. I worry about whether or not we are going to keep delivering cleaner air as we move forward so we can have healthy air to breathe. I worry about water quality and quantity and the droughts New Mexico is experiencing these days. On the whole, I worry about the future we're handing to our kids. But that's just a small sampling of my worries these days because part of the challenge of EPA and other federal agencies is the attack we now see on science itself.

Science and scientists have always been a big part of our success here in the US and our technical expertise is unmatched; to denigrate that for favorable political outcomes is disconcerting to me and should be to you as well. Partisan politics are presenting real challenges in terms of the functioning of our democracy. This is when my mother would say, "Gina, we're going to hell in a handbasket." How fitting and how cool is that saying?! The best thing I like about that, is that *no one actually knows what a handbasket is!*? The take-away is that it's apparently only the destination, not the vehicle, that is important and I like that.

But I think we all need to take a little bit of a step back and try to relax a bit. I try to do that myself every day because I am tired of being anxious and annoyed and downright angry. Seriously, every other morning I wake up to my husband screaming at MSNBC. "Gina, wait'll you see, look at that tweet!?" How many times can anyone wake up to that? I just say, "Ken . . . turn the TV off, get a cup of coffee, play with the dog, let's calm ourselves down." Because, you can't just be screaming all the time that science is under attack! It's like yelling, "the Russians are coming! the Russians are coming!" . . . only now they actually may be!

I mean, everything is under attack, science and just plain facts. So, we have issues here. I don't know if I'm tired, or ticked off, or just incredibly traumatized. But I am done letting this, or any, administration in the US tell me that we have to go backwards to go forwards. That is simply not true! So, I for one am not moping. I am going to start walking and talking with a sense of purpose.

I believe that, as a country, we want people who pay attention to the facts, who want to pay attention to the science, who want the US to always be the strongest country in the world. So I am going to do everything I can to make people work together for our future in this country. That's what we all have to do, each and every one of us. Stop talking to yourselves, talk to one another. Isn't that what we've always done in our lives? I don't care if you disagree with me, I just care if you and I can agree that our children's health is important and we should protect their future. That's what I care about. So let's work together, let's talk to one another.

The best thing I did when I left the Administration was to take on a couple of fellowships at Harvard. One of the special things about Harvard is the young people there. They are smart and they have access to information about the world, that we never had. So, they have a sense of understanding and they have a THIRST for social justice that seems as genuine as my memories of the 60's. The students are just amazing people.

And what I tried to do during my fellowships was to explain to them that you need to focus on the real world, not the world within the Beltway. You can get angry and upset about what is happening in Washington D.C, but you have to stay hopeful and get engaged. The world belongs to these students and all of you. You just have to grab it. If we work together, we will make progress, no matter what happens in Washington, D.C.

I hate to be disrespectful to anybody that thinks that D.C. is the real world, but I have to tell you that it really isn't. The real world is here. The world is at this school. The real world is all about learning and working hard to build change from the bottom up. Nobody has ever changed the world from D.C. down. That's not the way it works. Great ideas in D.C. generally came from 20 years of hard work at grassroots organizations to focus attention to what's really happening in our communities. And those communities got so obnoxious that states had to say, "Oh damn, I've got to do something." Then they do something and then states get so obnoxious that the federal government marches in and finds a federal "solution." A solution that usually is exactly what the grassroots have been telling them for twenty years! So, let's calm down about D.C., and let's pay attention to our own communities, our own states about what's happening in the real world.

I'm not simply going to tune out and let myself get down because too much is at stake. We cannot allow our country to be split by those who think they only have to deal with half of us or a quarter of us. That's not democracy. Our democracy promises to be "Of, By and For the People" – that means all the people. And the environmental has never ever, ever been a partisan issue and we cannot allow it to become one. The environment does not discriminate between Republicans and Democrats. It's all about breathing clean air and drinking clean water. While Democrats might argue in Congress with the Republicans, and I know I was in some pretty heated hearings, but I never heard anyone say, "I'm perfectly fine with my kids breathing dirty air."

So, let's get over the partisanship. If you remember correctly, the early movers and shakers in the environmental movement were actually *not* the Democrats! I love the Democrats dearly, but when it comes to conservation you can't find anyone better than Teddy Roosevelt, a Republican. He started the National Parks system. And guess who actually created the EPA? I'll give you a clue, he was the best Republican President ever . . . you must know already, RICHARD NIXON! Ok, not the best but he did one good thing, congratulate him for it! And George H.W. Bush, another Republican, pushed for and signed the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990, which is the arguably the most successful public health bill ever passed in any country. It has saved millions of lives and spurred significant investment in new technologies and jobs. We should all be proud that he President Bush focused on clean air but in many ways his administration was compensating for problems created by the prior Administration when they sought to pull back protections that led to significant public backlash. People care about clean air!

So, we can't allow core values of our country to be divided just because someone decided somewhere along the line that we had to call them Democrat or Republican. I have worked for one Democratic governor and five Republican governors. And each one of those governors was invested in their families, and their own kids, and knew they would be held accountable for the wellbeing of the families

they represent. They knew that their job was to make people's lives better and protecting the environment was a big part of that effort.

So listen, here's the situation today. I know we must face the challenge of climate change head on and quickly. I also know that denial of climate science has been a fundamental part of the Republican platform. This Administration in particular is very vocal in their denial of climate science. In my opinion, they simply don't want to deal with the fact that the climate is changing because it doesn't fit their ongoing narrative or their political interests.

One of the toughest challenges we all face today in fight against climate change is how to better articulate the issue and concerns and solutions in ways that are relevant to the people we need to engage. We need to stop talking about the health of the planet. The planet simply doesn't care if the climate is changing, it will still be a functioning planet. But people need to care - we may not be living on the planet! And that's the point. Climate change is a public health issue, not a planetary problem. So, stop focusing so much on polar bears and melting glaciers. It's about our health and our children's future, just like EPA is not really about birds and bunnies, it's about protecting public health.

Now, for all of you students who are ready to go out and tweet about how awful I am about bunnies, I love them. I just don't do that work. My work is about outreach on public health, which is why I'm at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health arguing that if we're going to invest billions of dollars on how we might develop in a sustainable way, let's consider how best we might keep people healthy and safe at the same time. How do we deal with the fact that there are going to be 9.6 billion people on the Earth in 2050 and we are 70% short of the food supply we would need to keep people healthy. How do we deal with that? To address that reality we need to start thinking about sustainability through a public health lens. We have to keep in mind that it's all about our children, our families, and their future. If we do, we will cut through the partisan politics of today and find a way to act together.

And if we work hard, we can help scientists get a little bit better in communicating science. Now I know climate science is complicated, but we have to speak clearly. This is what I tell them to say when they talk about climate change. So, repeat after me, this is all you need to know . . . three things about climate change, ready?

- 1.) Climate change is real.
- 2.) Manmade emissions are causing it.
- 3.) That's why women need to rule the world!

That's it, I don't think I need to say more, I mean that passionately. But listen, as far as I can see, there has been a lot of discussion about going backwards. This is the first Administration that I know of in history, which has a sole vision for the future centered on undoing the prior Administration's vision. It drives me a bit crazy, I'll admit that. But as my mother would say, for me "it's not a drive it's merely a putt." But here's the good news: while the [current] Administration may talk a lot about rollbacks they are TERRIBLE at accomplishing them. So, let's celebrate their ineptness.

Simply put, if you don't talk to and work with the career staff, if you don't talk to people on all sides of an issue, if you don't follow the public process, and try

to understand what the public needs and wants, then you are not going to be able to undue final rules that have followed the law, followed the science, and benefitted from tremendous public outreach. That is exactly why these rollbacks are simply not going to succeed. So, don't worry so much. Instead, try to focus on what's going on in the real world. Because change is happening folks! Really good change is happening.

Do I care about the Clean Power Plan potentially being rolled back? Of course I do! Do I think that they are going to succeed? No. Their proposed rollback included eleven pages of legal arguments. Now there are a lot of lawyers here, how many pages of legal arguments are needed to litigate when someone slip-and-fall on a banana peel in supermarket? At least a hundred right!? What's a stake? A sore hip vs. the future of mankind, need I say more! The Clean Power Plan was a great step forward, and I hope it continues, but it's most lasting value was to set the direction of clean energy out to 2030. It provided business certainty and the utilities are continuing to invest just as if the Clean Power Plan was in force. And the two biggest CEOs announced that they wouldn't change their investment strategy now that the Clean Power Plan is being reconsidered. Why? Because clean energy is winning in the market because it's cheaper. It's the economy, stupid! Clean energy is happening even faster than anyone could have ever imagined. Our real challenge with clean energy is to ensure that it's not just available to people with means, but also available to every human being in this country and beyond. That's the challenge. And people are beginning to bet creativity and innovation will follow.

And if you look at transportation, which is the next big sector we need to address, take a close look at automated electric vehicles. If you don't think that will be part of our future, future I would challenge your thinking. They are already here and they are here to stay. Now, Ken and my children think that that's a very good thing for me personally, because I am a lousy driver, but I would argue that everyone in Boston suffers from that defect. We drives like "Mass-holes" as many people tell me.

If you can begin to envision a clean energy future built on a world that is no longer dependent on fossil fuels, you can begin to envision a healthier world for ourselves and our children. That's the world I want students to drive towards. That's the vision we all need to embrace for our future. That's the hope that all of us must hang onto. Because if we only sit around and mope, the world will see us not just as the biggest slugs in the world, but we will have become a dysfunctional democracy that doesn't work for its people. So stay positive and get active because Democracy is a participatory sport – you have and participate.

Get out and talk to one another, and vote. When I was a kid and complained about this, that, and the other thing (cause I was always complaining) my Mom and Dad would say to me, "Enough, Gina, stop whining, why don't you just pull up your big girl pants and do something?" So that's what I say to everyone out here. Pull up your big girl, big boy and gender neutral pants and do something and we'll all be better for it!

Thank you very much.