

*BLOG: Coal Tattoo: Energy policy and politics: Which way will  
W.Va. go? Coal Tadoo (Charleston Gazette) June 11, 2012  
Monday 5:17 PM EST*

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Which way will W.Va. go?

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**BODY:**

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[[http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coalattoo/files/2012/06/manchinde  
ms.jpg](http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coalattoo/files/2012/06/manchinde<br/>ms.jpg)]

Gazette photo by Lawrence Pierce

It goes without saying that energy policy and politics -- and the way these things are covered by West Virginia media -- don't always match reality.

And so it was that West Virginia Democrats over the weekend passed a resolution urging all members of their party to support President Obama [<http://wvgazette.com/News/201206090053>] in November's general election. The resolution probably matters about as much to state residents as it does whether Sen. Joe Manchin and Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin are going to vote for their

party's president or not. What matters more is that, while many Democrats profess interest in "party unity" and want party members to vote straight ticket, fewer party leaders are willing to publicly question the positions on coal, energy and environmental issues that have put Sen. Manchin and Gov. Tomblin at odds with the Democratic administration in Washington.

As we reported on Friday

[<http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coalattoo/2012/06/08/where-west-virginia-democrats-stand-on-coal/>], the state Democratic platform four years ago contained strong statements in favor of enforcing federal environmental protections and working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This year, the party convention appears to have backed ever-so-slightly away from this -- but it also doesn't appear to have added any language voicing the sort of out-of-control opposition to reasonable environmental protections that Sen. Manchin and Gov. Tomblin have advocated. As reported in Sunday's Gazette-Mail [<http://wvgazette.com/News/201206090053?page=2>]:

During the convention, delegates also passed the 2012 party platform, which includes a section about working toward "a cleaner, healthier environment that promotes energy independence."

The section also says the party is fighting for "broad improvements in federal and state energy policies to combat increasingly serious environmental issues both globally and here at home."

[<http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coalattoo/files/2012/06/tomblindeconv.jpg>]

Gazette photo by Lawrence Pierce

UPDATED:

The 2012 party platform is online here [<http://www.wvdemocrats.com/documents/2012Platform.pdf>], and includes this statement about coal, under the heading

"Energy Independence" (thanks to the Daily Mail's Ry Rivard for pointing out it had been posted):

a) We support energy independence that uses "clean-coal" technology to fuel and power America and the expansion of West Virginia's energy resources to include our rich natural gas deposits and all forms of clean and renewable energy.

b) We support responsible drilling practices that respect the mineral and property rights owners.

Under the heading "Environment" there's this general policy statement:

The West Virginia State Democratic Party is dedicated to working toward a cleaner, healthier environment that promotes energy independence. As a moral obligation to future generations, the West Virginia State Democratic Party advocates for broad improvements in federal and state energy policies to combat increasingly serious environmental issues both globally and here at home.

It also says:

We support enforcement of the Clean Air Water Acts to help preserve our environment. West Virginians have a right to safe drinking water and clean air to breathe.

And under the headline "Reclamation" it says:

a) We believe that reclamation of mined areas should be complete.

b) We strongly support enforcement of regulations with regard to all extractive

industries.

If convention delegates were concerned about the positions that Sen. Manchin and Gov. Tomblin have taken on the issues, as opposed to whether they will blindly support the whole ticket,

such comments weren't seen as important enough to mention in the media coverage [<http://www.dailymail.com/News/201206100105>] of the convention. Horse-race coverage is more important, even if it's just a race over whether Larry Puccio will remain party chairman.

At the same time, it's interesting to note that, despite West Virginia's obsession with coal's well-being, sometimes the national discussion of energy policy really doesn't include much talk about coal's future.

[<http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coaltattoo/files/2012/06/NCFracksign.jpg>]

Robert Alpaugh holds signs during a march down the Bicentennial Mall to the Legislative Building in Raleigh, N.C., Tuesday, June 5, 2012, as the Senate Commerce Committee considered a bill that would legalize a form of natural gas drilling known as "fracking." AP Photo/The News and Observer, Chuck Liddy)

In Sunday's New York Times, author and energy analyst Daniel Yergin wrote a 1,400-word commentary called America's New Energy Reality

[<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/10/opinion/sunday/the-new-politics-of-energy.html?partner=rss=rss=print>]. Coal wasn't mentioned once. Of course, Yergin is a huge promoter of the new natural gas drilling technologies, and what you don't hear from him is talk about whether reserves like the Marcellus Shale play are as big as gas companies and their publicists would have us believe [<http://blogs.wvgazette.com/watchdog/2012/01/23/doe-slashes-estimate-of-marcellus-shale-reserve/>] -- or about the growing concerns about gas drilling's potential environmental downsides. Sunday's Times also included an editorial questioning the natural gas boom

[[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/10/opinion/sunday/natural-gas-by-the-book.html?\\_r=1=rssnyt=rss](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/10/opinion/sunday/natural-gas-by-the-book.html?_r=1=rssnyt=rss)] (as did today's Gazette [<http://www.wvgazette.com/Opinion/Editorials/201206090058>]), telling us:

Switching to natural gas is not going to solve climate change. But a gas-fired power plant emits only half as much carbon dioxide

as a coal-fired plant, and this is no time to squander any advantage. Two weeks ago, the International Energy Agency announced that atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide in 2011 were 3.2 percent higher than the year before, and are now at record levels.

Would protecting the water and the air bankrupt the industry? No. The report estimates that operating with a near-zero-impact environmental footprint would add about 7 percent, or \$600,000, to the typical \$8 million cost of a well in, say, Texas or North Dakota. That is affordable for a well that could produce millions of dollars in revenue over its lifetime.

The Obama administration has taken two modest steps this year. The Environmental Protection Agency will require drillers to reduce ground-level air pollutants and capture methane in storage trucks for later resale. But the rules apply only to new wells. The Interior Department has proposed stricter standards for wastewater storage that apply only to the public lands it controls.

Stronger federal rules are plainly needed. Concern for the planet is unlikely to persuade industry to drop its objections, but the public opposition should. Americans need to know that hydrofracturing is safe.

Despite such concerns, Gov. Tomblin and his administration continue their all-out push not only for coal -- but for natural gas drilling. A weekend Associated Press story [<http://wvgazette.com/News/marcellus/201206100018>] outlined the administration's interest in conducting a cost-benefit analysis of switching at least part of the state's vehicle fleet to natural gas. One wonders whether such a cost-benefit analysis will include examining whether the natural gas boom -- and switching vehicles to natural gas -- is good for the planet's climate.

We've reported before on the Gazette's Sustained Outrage blog [<http://blogs.wvgazette.com/watchdog/2012/04/09/another-study-questions-benefits-of-switch-to-gas/>] about a recent study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science in this regard, and Joe Romm has commented on his Climate Progress

blog

[<http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/04/09/460384/natural-gas-is-a-bridge-to-nowhere-absent-a-carbon-price-and-strong-standards-to-reduce-methane-leakage/>]:

... The other shocker in this study is how bad natural gas vehicles (NGVs) are for the climate. In particular, many are trying to pass legislation for switching heavy duty diesel vehicles to natural gas. The study concludes that such a switch sharply increases Technology Warming Potential for many decades, and no one alive today would ever see a climate benefit from that switch ...

... The problem for NGVs, as study coauthor and EDF chief scientist Steven Hamburg explained to me, is that the extra steps involved in using natural gas as a transport fuel -- including fueling and onboard storage, increases the system leakage rate significantly. And these leaks are probably much harder to address. So the possibility that, say, the entire leakage rate for the heavy-duty vehicle infrastructure, from fracking to fueling, could ever be brought down to below 1% is pretty darn small.

The state Democratic platform and Gov. Tomblin's push for natural gas vehicles are both built on the notion that the goal of American energy policy should be to make our country "energy independent."

Of course, real energy experts believe that energy independence is a "dry hole," as the Wall Street Journal explained [[http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB115204999066897677-b03T8Jon9KGjQ4xcbPtXrBMvAuI\\_20060803.html?mod=tff\\_main\\_tff\\_top](http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB115204999066897677-b03T8Jon9KGjQ4xcbPtXrBMvAuI_20060803.html?mod=tff_main_tff_top)] in describing what it called "among the least realistic political slogans in American history":

... Energy experts across the political spectrum are criticizing politicians' calls for "energy independence," saying the goal falls somewhere between pipe dream and economic impossibility.

"Energy independence is an emotionally compelling concept," says Jason Grumet, executive director of the National Commission on Energy Policy, a bipartisan, nonprofit group financed by private foundations, "but it's a vestige of a world that

no longer exists."

Indeed, the U.S. is moving rapidly away from energy independence: Oil imports made up 35% of the nation's petroleum supplies in 1973 and 59% in the first four months of 2006, according to the Department of Energy. Moreover, 66% of the oil consumed in the U.S. is used in the transportation sector, where Americans, with their penchant for hefty cars with big engines, are by far the planet's biggest consumers of oil.

The allure of energy independence is easy to see. It reinforces the belief that Americans can control their own economic destiny and appeals to a "deep-seated cultural feeling that we are Fortress America and we will not be vulnerable to unstable regimes," says David Jhirad, a former Clinton administration energy official who is vice president at World Resources Institute, an environmental-research group.

In fact, experts say, America's energy fortunes are inextricably linked to those of other countries. Global oil markets are interconnected, with oil prices set internationally. That means supply disruptions anywhere in the world will continue to have an almost instantaneous effect on the pump price of gasoline in the U.S.

"The real metric on this is not imported oil, but how much oil we use, period," says Jerry Taylor, senior fellow at the libertarian **Cato Institute** who dismisses calls for energy independence as "rhetorical nonsense that transcends party affiliation."

Or, as USA Today reported

[[http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/issues/2004-10-24-energy-independence\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/issues/2004-10-24-energy-independence_x.htm)] two years prior to that:

Energy experts dismiss such talk as little more than empty campaign promises that are not backed up with tough policy changes needed to make a significant difference.

"You need to understand that when they discuss energy independence it's a rhetorical gimmick," says Paul Roberts, the

author of the book *The End of Oil*.

"It sounds good, but the truth is there is no such thing as energy independence for a country that uses as much oil as we do in the United States," Roberts adds. "They've been saying it since Nixon's time. You have to say it. It's like mom and apple pie."

So to be fair, West Virginia political leaders aren't the only ones who trumpet this notion of "energy independence."

But what this weekend's news shows us is that even when our political leaders don't talk about coal, they don't seem to be able to really focus on what matters when it comes to our future energy policies.

[<http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coalattoo/files/2012/06/demconvention.jpg>]

When it comes to coal, though, West Virginia political leaders refuse to say even the smallest, most modest negative thing. They won't even consider coming up with a reasoned energy policy for the state that takes into account the negative impacts of mountaintop removal and coal's huge contributions to global warming. So in responding to criticism that they aren't taking on the Obama administration (a notion that in itself is nonsense [<http://blogs.wvgazette.com/coalattoo/2012/06/08/sen-manchin-weak-on-the-war-on-coal-seriously/>]), they either go even further out there in their promotion of coal or they are reduced to non-answers or the kind of absolute double-talk we saw this weekend

[<http://www.dailymail.com/News/201206100105>]:

Asked to comment on the resolution passed Saturday, a spokeswoman for Manchin didn't directly answer the question.

"The Senator has already addressed this issue. He's focused on bringing people together to solve our problems for the next generation, not the next election," spokeswoman Emily Bittner said ...

... Puccio said in an interview he supported the party, top to



bottom.

Asked if he was concerned that some members were breaking away and not supporting Obama, Puccio thought for a few seconds.

"I will continue to encourage the leaders within our state party to work with this administration so that they feel comfortable in supporting this president," Puccio said. "At the same time, I would always encourage this administration to work with our Democrat leaders so that our leaders would feel comfortable supporting him."