

One last climate hearing, just for the record... - November 17, 2010

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Humorous. Tragic. Entertaining. Tense. Terrifying. Downright goofy. The Democrats' final climate hearing on the House Science Committee Wednesday was all of the above.

It was a lively affair by Capitol Hill standards, with excursions into temperature records, cloud physics and computer modelling. Prominently featured was the top of Pennsylvania State University geoscientist [Richard Alley's](#) nodding head (denoting the North Pole in demonstrations of how [axial tilt](#) affects long-term climate). It was a throwback to days gone by, a time when the science itself was under dispute and not what to do about it. Most importantly, it was also a gentle preview of things to come, a kind of practice run for climate scientists who will soon face a much more hostile audience when Republicans take over the US House of Representatives.

Washington Democrat Brian Baird organized the [hearing](#) as chairman of the Subcommittee on Energy and Environment. Baird is leaving Congress of his own volition, but it also served as a kind of farewell for House Democrats, who are losing power due to voters' volition. As far as legislative affairs go, the hearing was utterly irrelevant, but Baird and others took pains to note that all of the testimony would go into the historical record (written testimony is already up on the hearing website).

Beginning with Ralph Cicerone, president of the National Academy of Sciences, a team of researchers offered up their best explanations for how the community writ-large has arrived at its gloomy warnings about a world pumped full of greenhouse gases. But the climate skeptics were granted a place on all three panels, which occasionally led to polite back-and-forth but only once escalated into a veritable clash (featuring Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory scientist [Ben Santer](#) hammering on noted sceptic [Patrick Michaels](#) of the Cato Institute for cherry-picking evidence, misleading lawmakers, ignoring uncertainties in his own numbers while highlighting uncertainty in others' data, and just generally being wrong).

Baird served as a friendly host while pressing scientists to address their critics. South Carolina Republican Bob Inglis, currently the ranking Republican, was equally receptive and eager to engage with scientists on the implications of their data, but he is one of many moderates who fell victim to the right-wing Tea Party movement and will be departing next year. The coming political shift was on display.

The likely candidate to chair the House Science Committee, Texas Republican Ralph Hall, took aim at both climate science and regulations in his [opening statement](#) before departing (for more on that, see [Politico](#)). Hall left California Republican Dana Rohrabacher to challenge the climate scientists, and Rohrabacher did so by citing the relative paucity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (how could such a small quantity of stuff have such a big impact?) and repeatedly pointing out that the earth's climate has changed in the past (each time prompting a nod of the head, with an index finger on top illustrating the earth's axis, from Alley).

One Republican who was receptive to the science and will be sticking around is Maryland's Roscoe Bartlett. He focused most of his time on the looming oil shortage and how conservatives might be willing to embrace a move away from fossil fuels even if they question global warming. As an aside, he also offered Rohrabacher a simple analogy for how a little bit of carbon dioxide could have such a large impact by likening the climate to a car that is delicately balanced on a cliff, such that a baby could push it over the edge. "If we are at a tipping point, it's irrelevant whether our contribution is small or large," he said.

In his explanation to Rohrabacher, Alley said multiple methods for calculating the climate's sensitivity to carbon dioxide suggest trouble ahead. The uncertainties are such that people like Michaels might turn out to be right in suggesting that dire predictions about global warming are overblown, he acknowledged. Or they could turn out to be very wrong, as the uncertainty in such predictions cuts both ways.

"It could be a little better, a little worse, or a lot worse," Alley said. "If this were a video game, I would push the button and see what happens - it would be very exciting."

