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The Weekend Interview with John Dingell: Some Inconvenient Truths

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Washington -- At the beginning of every Congress, Michigan Democrat John **Dingell** offers a bill to create a national health insurance system -- the same bill first offered by his father in 1943. As the longest-serving House member, that means Mr. **Dingell** has been offering the exact same legislation for, oh, 52 years now.

Such tenacity might explain why his own party is alternating between fury and worry over Mr. **Dingell's** role in today's great energy debate. Democrats took over Congress vowing to make global warming a top priority, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi planned to notch a quick victory with a bill that was long on political symbolism and cost, if short on actual emissions reductions.

Standing in her way has been Mr. **Dingell**. Much to the speaker's consternation, the powerful chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee is insisting that any bill should actually accomplish something, and that its pain be borne by all Americans (rather than just his Detroit auto makers). In recent months he has been circulating his own proposals for hefty new taxes on energy, gasoline and homeowners -- ideas that are already giving the rest of his party the willies.

His position arguably makes Mr. **Dingell** the lone honest broker in the global warming debate. But it also makes him a headache for all his Democratic friends, who'd prefer he just play political nice. For his part, the 81-year-old Dean of the House -- as feisty and courtly and colorful a congressman as you'll ever find - is unrepentant.

"I wasn't sent down here to destitute [my district]. And I wasn't sent down here to destitute anyone else. . . . I've got a responsibility to legislate, but I've got a responsibility to legislate well. I'm going to be honest with the American people about this and say 'look here, fellas, this is what we're going to have to do to you to fix global warming. You tell us whether you like it or not.'"

For the record, Big John doesn't think Americans will like it, but he finds that a poor excuse for not telling them the facts. As he greets me warmly, insists I occupy his best chair, and allows me to take in his striking office (decorated with the many horns and heads the avid hunter has bagged over the decades), he talks about the immense pressure he was under earlier this year to write a quick energy bill that included everything from new standards for light bulbs to a massive new system for regulating CO₂.

Ms. Pelosi wanted a bill by the Fourth of July; she even set up a new "Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming," headed by Rep. Ed Markey, to hurry the work. Mr. **Dingell**, who dryly notes that he's worked on "three or four" energy bills in his life, instead bucked his leadership by refusing to include the complex issues of climate regulation and auto standards in the bill the House passed this summer.

Mr. **Dingell** said he explained that Democrats had a responsibility to put forward a bill that was both "truthful" to the American people, as well as one "that works." And that takes time. "Probably in the 50 years I've been in this place, it's going to be the single hardest thing I've confronted."

Adding to Mr. **Dingell's** reluctance to hurry is that he feels many of the current climate proposals bumping around Congress are neither honest nor adequate. Most would set up a cap-and-trade program, much like that developed in Europe following the Kyoto Protocol. Mr. **Dingell** notes how easy it is to rig a system like that, and points out that the market for CO₂ emissions that Europe did set up has already

fallen apart: "Europe has shown that this is hell to make work. They're going back to the drawing board again, with no assurance they won't make the same mistakes they did before."

He adds that a cap-and-trade system alone doesn't convey the real cost of climate change, since it puts its primary cost on companies, which then pass that burden on to consumers via higher prices. It's a hidden tax, he says, which is precisely why so many politicians like it. "I haven't found many [environmentalists or economists] saying cap-and-trade works. But that approach happens to be politically easiest, because people can say the program isn't a tax, which is a bare-faced lie, as you know."

Another worry of the energy committee chairman's is that many of the proposals for cutting emissions aren't fair, in that they dump a disproportionate amount of the costs on a few industries. That's particularly the case with proposals to raise the Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE) standards, which would require Detroit auto makers to design much more efficient cars.

Many Democrats want to raise the fleet average to 35 miles per gallon by 2020, while Mr. **Dingell** (and 169 fellow House members) wants to phase it in over a slightly longer period. As one of the authors of the first CAFE standards in the 1970s, he worries that today's new members don't always consider the financial consequences of big environmental bills.

"There are a lot of people here who don't understand the auto industry," he says. "If you phase these numbers in too soon, you force engineering in ways that can't be done. And you end up forcing a situation where people have to make cars that don't sell, or don't run, or cost too much, and they go broke doing it."

This complexity is why he also insisted CAFE standards be treated separately from the earlier energy bill, and he still thinks there's big potential for Congress to do irreparable damage. "I worry that with mistakes or bad handling, I could shut down the American auto industry, and that holds real terrors for me."

That being said, Mr. **Dingell** has made clear to the auto industry that his colleagues are intent on seeing some sort of CAFE hike, and that the industry would do well to support him. "I told them, 'Your best interest is in going with me, and let me tell you why. You are going to hate the bill I give you, but it's going to be a bill with which you can live. If you don't work with me, you'll still get a bill. And you'll hate it. But it will be a bill you can't live with.'"

So if the current proposals for a climate program aren't workable, what does Mr. **Dingell** think is the right equation? He says he's committed to a bill that makes drastic cuts -- some 60% to 80% emissions reductions by 2050 -- since anything less won't do much good. He also thinks any climate program needs to include an array of powerful tools that will allow policy makers to truly influence how much energy people use.

All this argues for new energy taxes, he says, because higher energy prices are one of the few things that cause people to cut back consumption. While Mr. **Dingell** has yet to unveil his broader climate-auto legislation, he has been releasing broad outlines. It will include a cap-and-trade system, but alongside that will be a big new carbon tax (probably around \$50 a ton), an estimated 50-cent-a-gallon increase in the gas tax, and an end to the mortgage-interest deduction for Americans who own homes larger than 3,000 square feet.

Taxes, he argues, will give policy makers more options in influencing behavior. He uses the example of a gas tax. "Why would I do that? First of all, it means I can reduce the use of gasoline, and I can make it easier for CAFE to work."

But he also explains that it allows policy makers to "differentiate between fuels." By taxing gasoline but not diesel, for instance, he hopes to get more people into diesel cars. That would further reduce emissions, he argues, "since diesel gets "about a 20% to 25% fuel benefit."

Finally, Mr. **Dingell** says new taxes, and the revocation of the mortgage interest deduction, are the only way to truly spread around the sacrifices necessary for significant emissions reductions.

"People have got to understand that addressing the problem we have as the largest user of energy and emitter of greenhouses gases is not something that will exist without pain. . . . It is ultimately going to evolve into a significant cost for everybody, and significant changes in lifestyle. . . . Everybody is trying to tell everyone that we can do this without any pain to you, and we'll just stick it to so and so. . . . But in my bill, everyone is going to put their farthing in the collection box. Nobody will put in too much, nobody too little, but nobody will get out of it."

All this tax talk scares the dickens out of Mr. **Dingell's** Democratic colleagues, and he knows it. Gas prices are soaring, and most members would prefer to commit hara-kiri than propose legislation that would raise them further. Ditto the idea of meddling with the politically explosive mortgage deduction. House Democrats still have painful memories of 1993, when Vice President Al Gore convinced them to pass a broad energy tax on BTU (British thermal units) usage.

"I knew I'd catch hell for [introducing a carbon tax], because I also did for voting for [BTU] before. As a matter of fact, that vote probably cost Democrats control of the House. Everyone around here is scared to death of it," admits Mr. **Dingell**. He understands that many of his colleagues would prefer he just get out of the way, and let them collect some political credit for quick climate legislation. But he's past that point.

"I'm 50 years or more in this business, and I've learned to play for the long haul. When I was a kid around here I was like the other guys, saying 'don't worry about the cost, someone else has to worry about that.' Today, I don't want to have someone say, '**Dingell**, you jackass, look what you did to us.'"

Given his past skepticism on climate change, and his concern for the auto industry, Mr. **Dingell** also knows that he stands accused of floating a politically unpalatable carbon tax for no other reason than to sabotage any climate bill. He denies it vehemently. "When I sent the staff out to find out about this, I said 'Look, you go out and find the facts. I don't give a damn about the politics.' . . . I got no end of hell, and everybody has said I'm insincere. My response is that I've never introduced a piece of legislation that I didn't intend to pass."

He admits to some frustration that he's not getting more support. "The administration just huffs and sits back and says we're not interested in working on this . . . Industry is absolutely demoralized on this issue. My colleagues are running around making speeches about what ought to be done, but very few have experience in the matter."

If Mr. **Dingell** has learned anything in his time in Washington, it's to call them as he's sees them, and when I ask how many votes he thinks he'd get if he offered up his legislation tomorrow, he chuckles and says, "Well, at least one."

I mention that many of his fellow Democrats are still hoping to slip some sort of climate legislation and CAFE rule into the smaller energy legislation on which the House and Senate are about to start negotiations. How does he intend to block that offensive? He chuckles again and says, "If you have any ideas, let me know."

Not that he's about to give up, which gets back to his legendary tenacity. He tells me about working on the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990. "I remember people said, '**Dingell**, what a great job you did on Clean Air, you passed it on the House floor in 13 hours.' And I said, 'Yeah, it only took me 13 years to do it.'"

Will, 13 years from now, he have seen his climate proposal through? This evokes more than a chuckle; it's a giant laugh. "Before 13 years are up, I'm going to seek my 'permanent career,'" he quips. What, I ask, could possibly follow 50-odd years of Washington jousting? "Hunting, fishing and chasing a gorgeous blonde around the bedroom."