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An Auto Insider Takes on Climate Change

By David Von Drehle

There are millions of reasons to think Congress won't do much about global warming, all stockpiled in the lobbying budgets of the U.S.'s mightiest interest groups--automakers and other manufacturers, environmentalists, labor unions, farmers, oil companies, coal companies, utilities, the military, antitaxers and so on. A Washington axiom holds that it's always easier to do nothing than to do something. By that standard, tackling climate change, which would affect every industry and every private life, looks almost impossible.

On the other hand, there's John Dingell. Michigan's eternal Congressman, defender of Detroit's carbon-spewing gas hogs, would seem an unlikely cause for optimism. After all, his wife Deborah is a General Motors Foundation trustee, leading his critics to assert that Dingell is literally in bed with the auto industry.

But just as it took anticommunist Richard Nixon to open the door to China, and hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons to denounce misogyny in rap, so Dingell, Democrat from Dearborn and friend of factories, may be the insider able to drive change. At 80, restored to his wide-ranging dominion over the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, "John Dingell is one of the few people with the capacity to manage complex pieces of legislation where there are high stakes," says former House colleague Philip Sharp.

He's smart enough, strong enough, mean enough. Sharp saw Dingell up close the last time Big John reluctantly tackled air pollution--the 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act that successfully dealt with acid rain. Now Dingell has awakened to global warming, holding more than two dozen hearings on the issue since February and extracting on-the-record promises of cooperation from heads of industry more accustomed to obstruction.

He's not the most famous member of Congress, but he's among the most feared. "A trade-association leader recently told me that his group was going to shift from being against mandatory caps on carbon emissions to being for them," Sharp recounts. "When I asked why, he said, 'There's no way we can go meet with Dingell and just say no.' He didn't mention any other leader of the House or Senate, just Dingell."

He is the last link to a vanished era. Seeing Dingell hobbling along the halls of Congress on his cane or cupping his half-good ear to hear a colleague is like spotting an elderly mammoth alive in the natural-history museum. As long as he's not extinct, he's formidable. Dingell comes from a time when Congress did big things, like Medicare and the Voting Rights Act, as a matter of course. Key Congressmen were known as "bulls," and they didn't look to the White House for permission slips or marching orders. Dingell's first oath of office, in 1956, was administered by Sam Rayburn, whose power is memorialized in the congressional office building bearing his name.

"I am a legislator," said the last woolly mammoth in a recent interview with TIME. By which Dingell means he is in Congress to pass laws, not to wage ideological warfare or get his mug on television. He has never wanted anything beyond life in the House.

The art of moving a major bill is an elusive mix of endurance, persuasion, negotiation, intimidation--and timing. The field is sown with favors large and small over many years and watered with occasional menace. (Ask Dingell how he feels about being called "the meanest s.o.b. in Congress," and he quietly answers, "It's very useful.") With luck, the seeds bear fruit when the votes are finally counted. The process is so slow and cumulative that few people ever become masters. "I've

been doing it for years, and I learned from the best," Dingell said, "Rayburn, John McCormack [Rayburn's successor as Speaker], my dad."

John Dingell Sr. (born Dzieglewicz) first won the Dearborn seat in 1932 and held it for more than two decades before his son took over. Together, the Dingell dynasty covers nearly a third of the nation's history. "He was a skinny little shrimp," Dingell said of his dad. "Never drew a decent breath of air. Supposed to have died of tuberculosis in 1914. When the doctor told him that he had six months to live, Pop looked at him and said, 'Doc, I'll piss on your grave.' And Dr. Conway, whom Dad loved, died in '35. Pop died in 1955."

His son practically grew up in the House. Dingell recalls hunting rats "as big as cats" with an air rifle in the Capitol basement, and Franklin D. Roosevelt inscribed a photograph to him--"my friend"--around the time that Dingell was a 12-year-old congressional page. He insists that he never planned to occupy his father's seat, but the senior Dingell's death in office left a humming political machine leaderless and important goals unmet.

Dingell's victory in a special election was the first of 27 consecutive blowouts (some, he insists, harder than others). Unlike his father, Big John was physically imposing, and he filled his office walls with hunting trophies; visitors plead their cases under the cold gaze of Dingell kills. He honored his father by pushing for national health insurance and was chosen in 1965 to wield the gavel when the House passed Medicare.

Then, as now, many members of Congress coveted seats on Ways and Means or Armed Services, but Dingell preferred to master the process outside the spotlight. "No one paid any attention" to his subcommittee on fisheries, "so we were able to get a lot done," he explained. Between 1964 and 1974, Dingell was a driving force behind the National Wilderness Act, the Water Quality Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, wetlands preservation and bans on ocean dumping and the hunting of sea mammals.

In fact, Dingell would merit a bust on a pedestal at the Sierra Club, except that environmentalists cannot forget that his love for the outdoors is matched only by his love for heavy manufacturing. It was he who amended the Clean Air Act to guarantee that the U.S. auto industry must never be harmed by pollution regulations. And he has stoutly resisted increases in the gas-mileage requirements for sport-utility vehicles and minivans. "I've been looking after American manufacturing and American industry for years--it isn't just autos," Dingell acknowledged proudly. Besides, he added, neither he nor Detroit is to blame for the fact that overall mileage of the U.S. auto fleet hasn't improved. Americans simply prefer high-performance, four-wheel-drive towing machines, even for the preschool car pool. And in this free country, "if the people want something," he said, "they get it."

And now the people want to fight global warming. According to Dingell, his shift from skeptic to activist has two explanations. "The scientific evidence is now generally accepted as being clear," he said. "The other thing that has transpired is that there's a public acceptance that something has to be done. And you'll remember that we work for the people."

Those aren't the motives that have Capitol Hill buzzing, however. Insiders wonder if Dingell has been riled up by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, with whom he has a long-running feud. Over the years, Dingell has opposed her rise to party leadership. She, in turn, backed another member of Congress, Lynn Rivers, when Rivers was forced by redistricting to run for Dingell's seat. That was in 2002, but Dingell still savors the drubbing he gave Pelosi's friend. So bad blood was pulsing when the Democrats took the reins of Congress this year and Pelosi appointed a select committee to remove global warming from Dingell's grasp.

No protégé of Rayburn's would ever willingly give up jurisdiction over a lunch menu--let alone the biggest bill in decades. Dingell flexed the muscle of a half-century and rallied his fellow committee chairs against this infringement of prerogatives. The select committee was promptly neutered. "John is the quintessential congressional chairman, protecting his jurisdiction while often reaching to grab someone else's," according to Leon Panetta, who chaired the Budget Committee before serving as White House chief of staff. "The last thing he wants is to lose jurisdiction."

Dingell scoffs at the idea that intramural combat is the root of his new attitude. "I think the select committee is going to be as useless as feathers on a fish, and they're either going to be in my hair or at my feet," he grumbled. But he insisted that he isn't motivated by mere annoyances.

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In fact, he was moving even before Pelosi acted, he said. Within days of the Democratic victory in November, he had summoned a former member of his committee to return and testify on global warming. "Albert!" he barked sternly when former Vice President Al Gore came on the line. "I'd like you to come in."

The Gore hearing was quickly followed by sessions with leading scientists, auto manufacturers, power-company executives, economists and others. Energy and Commerce Committee chief of staff Dennis Fitzgibbons--lured back to Dingell's side after a lucrative stint as an auto-industry lobbyist--describes the "steep learning curve" for members of Congress, who have arrived, one by one, at "their holy [expletive] moment, when they say, 'Wow! This is bigger than I thought.'"

Behind the scenes, Dingell has delivered offer-you-can't-refuse messages to industry. "I've said, 'Fellas, the factual issue appears to be resolving itself. Work with me. I will do everything I can to get you a bill that you probably won't like--but with which you can live. And if you don't, you will have a bill that you won't like and can't live with.'" When the ceos of General Motors, Ford and DaimlerChrysler testified in March, Big John demanded yes or no answers to a series of questions that boiled down to just one: Are you working with us or against us? With varying degrees of pain on their faces, each one promised to cooperate.

But the devil's in the details. And any serious climate-change legislation will be a forest of details. The key feature of any Dingell bill will be a mandatory cap-and-trade system modeled on Dingell's 1990 acid-rain legislation. Industries would be allowed to emit fixed amounts of greenhouse gases according to their share of the overall problem. If a power plant or factory reduces its emissions, the saving can be sold to plants that fail to adhere to the cap. In this way, reductions become valuable and pollution costly.

Easy to say but fiendishly difficult to execute in a world where carbon emitters range from coal-fired power plants to the backyard grill. "How many sources of carbon dioxide are we talking about?" mused Fitzgibbons. "How do you allocate the amounts? t's a geometrically complex arrangement."

Europe's carbon cap-and-trade system is off to a poor start because too many permits were issued by governments trying to protect their own industries. On the other hand, too few permits could cripple the American economy.

Many economists and environmentalists prefer a straightforward tax on carbon emissions, with proceeds going to fund research and development of alternative energy. It's much simpler--but economists don't run for re-election. House Democrats with long memories recall the whipping they took for backing a similar tax in the Clinton era. The so-called BTU tax was one reason the party lost control of Congress in 1994, and they don't intend to repeat the experience. As Dingell dryly noted in a recent speech, "Many members of Congress remember only too clearly the letters B, T and U."

Even tougher is the one perplexing area in which the fight against global warming conflicts with the U.S.'s goal of greater energy independence: coal. "The U.S. is the Saudi Arabia of coal," Dingell recently declared. We have seemingly endless tons of the stuff, which can be converted into liquid fuel for cars. Coal boosters are pushing legislation through Congress to subsidize the use of coal instead of oil. The only problem: coal is the dirtiest source of greenhouse gases. Representative Rick Boucher, from Virginia's mining country, chairs the subcommittee on energy, but coal's influence goes further than that. Twenty-seven House Democrats hail from coal regions--a deeply meaningful number when Democrats control the chamber by just 16 votes.

The problem is so big, tangled and fraught that some House members prefer to let the Senate take the lead. After all, if Senate Republicans could be lured into a filibuster against a climate-change bill, they might hand the Democrats a strong issue for the upcoming presidential campaign. Dingell, who calls the Senate "a constitutional mistake," wants nothing to do with that strategy. Nor does he have any sympathy for environmentalists who believe the best thing to do is delay action until a Democrat wins the White House.

When both right and left, big business and the ultragreens are worried about what he's up to, call it a Dingell moment. He doesn't like ideologues. Extreme purity annoys him. "I write legislation from the middle," he explained. "I want to build a bill that will have broad bipartisan support that will have the public's confidence." And finally, "a bill that can be signed by the President."

His bipartisanship wears none of the lacy finery of a civics-class lecture. It is a strategy perfected in the bygone era of

Democratic dominance of Congress. Dingell knows a purist in his own party can slow him down more than a pragmatist across the aisle. So he likes to get started on a big initiative by cutting a deal with a ranking Republican. Only then does he turn to battle his fellow Democrats.

When this works, it can be impressive. The Clean Air Act amendments of 1990 were 13 years in the making (eight of them fairly quiet years as a result of the Reagan Administration's opposition to the bill). When Dingell at last brought the legislation to a vote, however, the amendments passed almost unanimously. But can the strategy work in today's more evenly--and bitterly--divided House?

One advantage Dingell will have in crossing party lines is his record in defending the U.S.'s industrial interests. He stands squarely on the only common ground Congress has found concerning global warming. In 1997 the Senate voted unanimously to condemn Kyoto-treaty provisions that would exempt China and other developing nations from mandatory carbon reductions.

Dingell is bulletproof in this area. "I do not propose that my country be the only country that pays the costs of addressing [global warming]," he said. "China is only an example. You've got India, you've got the former Soviet countries, you've got the Europeans. Everybody is trying to give fine speeches, get a lot of credit--and then stick somebody else with the bill."

Where Dingell's influence is most vulnerable, by contrast--his Achilles' heel--is Detroit. He risks losing credibility if he becomes the last man standing between the auto industry and increased-mileage requirements. Momentum is building in the Senate--encouraged by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union speech early this year--for a 4%-per-year increase in corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards.

Dingell would prefer to do away with the existing CAFE system for measuring fuel efficiency and replace it with a system that measures tailpipe emissions. After all, a car that runs 25 miles on a gallon of clean biodiesel might be preferable environmentally to a car that runs 35 miles on gasoline or liquid coal.

Maintaining his influence on global warming may mean swallowing the 4% pill--washed down, knowing Dingell, by a fountain of federal subsidies for the retooling of American auto plants. Some friends of the chairman believe that Dingell has chosen the toughest bill of his career to cap his historic tenure. If he survives this Congress and wins one more election, he will pass Mississippi's Jamie Whitten as the nation's longest-serving Congressman.

But Dingell is superstitious about the luck-changing power of grandiose statements, according to a longtime associate. So instead of a grand finale, he quietly but insistently drummed his cane on the floor of his Capitol hideaway office as punctuation for the long list of his legislative achievements.

"Look," he closed understatedly, "this is going to be one of the hardest tasks I've ever addressed." That said, "I intend to try and move this. If the problem is as big as everyone says--and it's an enormous problem--then we have a duty to move it.

"Don't we?"