

POL S 334 A - Jerry Taylor, A Paid Climate Change Skeptic Switches Sides

[00:00:00.09] - Hey, Inquiring Minds listeners, Kishore here. I just wanted to say thank you. Thank you for listening to over 200 episodes of Inquiring Minds. That's 200 plus hours of interviews with scientists, communicators, authors, leading thinkers from all walks of life.

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[00:00:44.78] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:46.47] - It's Monday, October 30, 2017, and you're listening to Inquiring Minds. I'm Indre Viskontas Each week, we bring you a new in-depth exploration of the space where science, politics, and society collide. We endeavor to find out what's true, what's left to discover, and why it all matters. You can find us online at inquiring.show, on Twitter at [@inquiringshow](https://twitter.com/inquiringshow), and on Facebook. And you can subscribe to the show on iTunes or any other podcasting app.

[00:01:19.08] Kishore Hari is off this week to run the Bay Area Science Festival, but I am joined by a very special guest, Stevie Lepp, who is the host of a podcast called Reckonings. Last year we collaborated with them on an episode and this year, we're doing the same. And I think this episode, in particular, you're really going to enjoy.

[00:01:37.41] So this episode, we are in collaboration with Reckonings as I've mentioned. And so the format of the show is a little bit different. You're primarily going to hear the story of Jerry Taylor, Jerome Cogburn Taylor, who is now an American environmental activist and policy analyst. But he is perhaps most well-known for the fact that he was a former climate change skeptic who came around to embrace policies to address climate change after researching the scientific consensus.

[00:02:06.10] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:02:10.06] - I certainly don't argue that climate change isn't real. It is real. We know that the planet is warming. We know industrial emissions have a lot to do with it.

[00:02:16.96] But there's a lot of uncertainties here. According to the IPCC, warming can be anywhere between 1 and 1/2 degrees Celsius to 4 and 1/2 degrees Celsius if we double pre-industrial levels of greenhouse gas emissions. And it turns out while the models are showing that the warming will be in the medium to high side of that spread, the data that we've seen suggests it will be on the low side.

[00:02:36.43] So I'm not arguing that the scientific consensus is necessarily wrong. What I am saying is that there's a lot of good reasons to think that warming will be on the very low side of the most likely outcomes projected by the IPCC. And if that's the case, then it's probably going to be a relative non-event. So that was the old elevator pitch.

[00:03:00.35] - Stevie Lepp, welcome to Inquiring Minds

[00:03:02.78] - Thank you.

[00:03:03.74] - It's great to have you back on the show, especially with this particular story that I find especially fascinating.

[00:03:09.51] - Yeah.

[00:03:10.04] - So tell me a little bit about how you found Jerry.

[00:03:13.28] - Yeah. So I found Jerry-- I'm always on the lookout for people who are changing their hearts and minds about all kinds of things. And I must have been looking for someone who had had some kind of transformation around climate change and found him through an article on The Intercept and discovered that he is, to my knowledge, the only paid, professional climate skeptic who has ever flipped. There have been many skeptics and probably a few, let's say, deniers who have flipped, members of Congress, and scientists, but no one who is actually paid to be a spokesperson for climate skepticism.

[00:03:59.00] - What an amazing individual for your show Reckonings, in which you talk about people who have these major transformations. And it's really exciting for us, because often on this show we talk about climate change. We also talk about how to bring science to society. We talk about how do we get people who are entrenched in a belief to look at the data in an objective way and come to a different conclusion perhaps. That's really, really hard.

[00:04:23.99] And so I was really excited to have you bring his story to us so that we can get a little bit more insight into how an individual does successfully change his or her mind, especially when they have a lot of motivation not to. An individual who's getting paid to be a climate skeptic is certainly not particularly motivated to change his tune.

[00:04:47.06] So I should also say that originally when we had first had a conversation about this collaboration, it was going to be part of a three episode climate series here at Inquiring Minds that we were running for October. But because of the hurricanes, and because of the wildfires in California, both of our previous guests had to reschedule. So climate change has affected Inquiring Mind's schedule.

[00:05:10.43] - So you're still getting it in some way in October. The climate series is still coming to you, folks.

[00:05:16.79] - Yeah. It's a little bit--

[00:05:17.79] - In one way or another.

[00:05:18.92] - --too direct. Yes. The climate change is real here in northern California. And we'll talk about it when the fires-- I mean, they're now contained, but we still have some rebuilding to do. But once everybody's back in action, we actually have some pretty exciting climate scientists to talk to.

[00:05:37.82] So let's take a short break. And we'll be back with Jerry's story.

[00:05:41.36] [MUSIC PLAYING]

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[00:07:21.88] - I'm not entirely sure what show it was, or I'm not even positive if I remember the network. It might have been CNN. It might have been CNBC, MSNBC, I don't recall. But anyway, I was in a debate with Joe Romm. He's a scientist.

[00:07:33.64] And we had a debate about climate change. And I argued on screen that, well, James Hansen testified in front of the United States Senate in the late '80s about climate change. It set off the entire political explosions that then followed. And what Dr. Hansen argued is that if we continued along, business as usual, and we didn't do anything to address the emissions, then we would see a tremendous amount of warming in the future. And he actually offered temperature projections to back that up.

[00:08:02.53] Well, it's been more than a decade since Dr. Hansen testified in front of the Senate. We can go back now and see how well those predictions have held up. And what do you know, we've seen far less warming than James Hansen argued that we should have seen by now. In fact, we've only seen about a quarter of it.

[00:08:17.62] And that suggested to me that the climate is simply not as sensitive to greenhouse gas emissions from industrial sources as we thought. That doesn't mean that climate change isn't happening necessarily, but it does mean that the models are running really hot. And that a lot of this debate in climate science is between what theory tells us should be happening based on rather dodgy climate models versus what we're actually seeing on the ground, we're just not seeing the kind of warming we should have been seeing by now.

[00:08:44.05] We go back to the Green Room and Joe said, let me ask you a question. Did you actually read James Hansen's testimony you just got done talking about? And I said, well, I mean, some time ago. It's been more than a decade since he gave it, but I didn't read it right before I came on the air.

[00:08:57.98] And he said so what was all this based on? And I said, well, it was based on some writings from climate skeptics that I've been working with. And he says, all right. Do me a favor. He says, I'm sure you won't do it. He said, because I imagine you're the total hack that I think you are. But if you're not, he said, go back to your office and read that testimony again.

[00:09:18.74] And if you bother to do this, Jerry, here's what you're going to find. You're going to find that he didn't just give one temperature projection, he gave three temperature projections based on different emissions profiles. Yes, he did offer a scenario A which he called business as usual, which strictly speaking, you reflected reasonably accurately.

[00:09:39.61] But he also gave B and C scenarios which reflect the different emissions assuming different kinds of-- whether we have public policy action or not. One of them had an emissions profile which is virtually just pretty close to what we've actually seen from that point in time when he gave that testimony to the present. And if you look at the temperature projection he gave for that scenario, it's pretty much spot on. I mean, he's pretty accurate. That's pretty much what we've seen.

[00:10:05.59] He said, so the bottom line is you're arguing that the models run hot and that the amount of warming we've seen proves it. And the reality is that's not at all what that underlying testimony suggests. He said, or don't bother to look at it, just be a hack. By God, I was going to go and reread Hansen's testimony and prove him wrong, right?

[00:10:29.34] And so I went back to my office and took Joe up on the challenge. And it didn't take long to dig up the testimony and look it over again in. And mirabile dictu, he was right.

[00:10:41.26] I figured I must have been missing something, because, after all, I work with scientists who have very strong opinions to the contrary. So I went and talked to a climate skeptic, a scientist, credentialed scientist, who publishes in the peer-reviewed literature upon occasion, who had offered this narrative on multiple occasions in the past.

[00:11:00.79] And I told them what happened. And I said, well, look, I just finished reading Hansen's testimony. And it seems to me like Joe's right. So what am I missing here? What am I overlooking in this debate?

[00:11:15.33] And it turns out, I wasn't overlooking anything. For 20 minutes, the scientist in question kind of hemmed and hawed and spun and was kind of dodging all of this. And finally, I said, look, I don't represent James Hansen. Let him get an attorney and explain or let him go on TV and explain it. My job is to put a bright spotlight on the fact that he's predicted a lot more warming than we've seen.

[00:11:37.51] That's what I've done. And that's what's happened. And I'm not sure why we're having this conversation.

[00:11:42.07] So that put me back on my heels. I mean, my gosh, I'm now dealing with somebody who I had been trusting for some time now who was purposefully and consciously misrepresenting the debate. And it shook me a lot. I told him it seems to me he was dodging and misrepresenting the debate for short-term rhetorical gain. And I didn't like being put in a spot of going out on national television and making an argument that he knows darn well that he fed me which was dodgy and misleading.

[00:12:18.22] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:12:28.79] So from that point forward, I began to do the due diligence with the narratives from the scientific community I was relying on before I would carry them forward into debate. And I found that far more often than not, the same story would play itself out over and over and over again. Either the studies were misrepresentative, or they were cherry picking data, or they alleged positions or arguments held by climate scientists that they were arguing against that really weren't held those climate scientists, or they were just not very good. They weren't peer-reviewed journals. To the extent to which they got any attention from climate mainstreamers, the studies would be shot to pieces.

[00:13:22.75] Well, I was certainly aware that I was becoming less and less comfortable with my position. But I thought that while the climate skeptics may be overstating their case, misrepresenting a lot of the argument, still by and large, they have a valuable-- they have a plausible narrative. But since I didn't trust any of that conversation anymore, and I certainly didn't want to be a party to-- well, if you can't trust your source, you shouldn't be using your sources. So I was much comfortable with the economics conversation.

[00:13:54.32] - The economics conversation revolves around the argument that addressing climate change is simply too costly for our economy to bear. And Jerry was more comfortable with that argument, until he came across an article by economist Jonathan Adler.

[00:14:15.88] - He argued that even if the climate skeptics are right, even if everything they say is correct, even if everything that the A-list climate scientists who testify for Republicans in front of the Congress about why we shouldn't act to do anything about climate, he said even if they're all right, that's not a good argument against climate action. He said, look, libertarians generally

believe that government is here to protect private property from being damaged by people who might trespass against it. And if party A-- the people who make greenhouse gas emissions-- are destroying the property or the persons of party B-- victims-- then just because A gains more than B loses doesn't mean it's A OK in the libertarian playbook.

[00:14:55.99] Libertarians are not utilitarians. They believe the government's job is to protect property rights with no proviso that says unless you make a whole lot of money by screwing with them. And I had never thought of it that way.

[00:15:08.57] - OK. So let's say you own a small vineyard on a rolling hilltop. Now because of climate change, your growing season is getting shorter and hotter. This year your grapes just dried out on the vines. And you can't sell wine from dry grapes.

[00:15:25.78] The point Jonathan Adler is making is that just because fossil fuel companies are making more money emitting greenhouse gases than you're losing because of how those emissions are damaging your vineyard doesn't make it OK that those emissions are damaging your vineyard. In other words, your property rights are being violated. And property rights are really important to libertarians like Jerry.

[00:15:51.88] So is addressing climate change too costly for our economy to bear? Well, some people, like you in this case, are already paying for it in the form of violated property rights. And libertarians believe that governments should protect property rights, which means governments should take climate action.

[00:16:14.07] - I got to the point where I could not find a credentialed economist in academia who published in the peer-reviewed literature who would argue against climate action, not a single one. I was there to oversee Cato's climate and energy and environmental policy operations. And one of the biggest issues in my bailiwick is climate policy. And I felt uncomfortable talking about it because I could not confidently make the case against climate action. But I didn't think there was any space for any other position at Cato. So I just found other things to spend my time on.

[00:16:49.00] - How long was that period of time?

[00:16:51.37] - Oh, that probably lasted, I don't know for exactly, maybe three, or four, or five years, something like that.

[00:16:56.65] - Three, four, or five years.

[00:16:58.52] - Yeah.

[00:16:58.93] - That's a long period of time to be running Cato's energy and climate policy operation without feeling comfortable talking about energy and climate policy, don't you think?

[00:17:10.17] - Well, I felt comfortable about talking about other matters back then. So I found ways to keep myself busy.

[00:17:17.02] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:17:22.47] He was introduced to me via email by Cliff Asness who is a hedge fund manager in New York. Cliff is a friend of mine and a donor to the Cato Institute. And Cliff shot me an email and said, hey, look, my former boss at Goldman, Bob Litterman asked if I might be able provide an introduction. Bob's still a good friend.

[00:17:43.59] He says, you know, Bob's kind of a soft libertarian who I agree on most things, but he is a climate activist. He says, you know, I'm kind of with you, I'm not. But still, he asked if I might introduce him to somebody at the Cato Institute so he might have a conversation. I encourage you to get together. He's a great guy. And even if you disagree with Bob, he's somebody who's very smart and interesting to talk to. So I said, fine, happy to meet him.

[00:18:11.58] So Bob comes in to see me. And in the room with me was Peter van Doren, who's the editor of Regulation Magazine and friend of mine. And Peter had shared my discomfort with our climate position. And so Bob came in and he said he introduced himself and explained his background. And it turns out that Bob Litterman was a partner at Goldman Sachs, but most notably, he was one of the first-- in fact, I think he was the first director of a quant operation on Wall Street. And within the academic community, he's known as one of the top risk management intellectuals in the world.

[00:18:53.26] And so he said, look, Jerry, I deal with risk at Goldman that are much like climate change every single day. We have a wide distribution of possible outcomes given various investment scenarios. And I can't tell you exactly what the chances are for each of those little scenarios to come to pass, but I do know that there is a distribution of risk. And when we have a distribution of various outcomes, many of them quite costly and dangerous for our clients, we don't just ignore them. We don't. We have to price those risks. And after we price those risks, maybe we'll hedge. Maybe we won't. But we can't ignore them.

[00:19:34.53] And he says, where I think a lot of this conversation in climate is going wrong is that you, the Cato Institute, and mainstream climate activists are in a hot war about the most likely outcome from climate changing. Your folks say it'll be on the lower end of the possible distribution of outcomes. And they argue it will likely be at the median or high end. And he says, you know, and I don't know. And maybe you're right what will come to pass. I don't know.

[00:20:01.96] He said, but if you price the risk associated with the various outcomes, the arguments against climate action just fall apart. They just fall apart. And that's particularly true when you recognize the fact that climate change is a non diversifiable risk. In other words, there's nothing I can invest in that will pay off if climate change happens.

[00:20:23.81] He says, now, Jerry, in markets when people are investing their own money and they confront non diversifiable risk in the marketplace, how much do they pay to avoid those risks? He says, the reality is they pay a ton to avoid risks like that. The case for action is absolutely undeniable.

[00:20:44.59] So after about an hour and a half or two hours of talking this through with Bob, he walked out of my office. And I looked to Peter and I said, it just seems to me that our position got shredded to pieces here.

[00:20:57.27] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:21:00.19] Well, actually it was kind of invigorating. I'm the kind of person who when he runs into a interesting, or clever, or intriguing, or counterintuitive idea wants to talk about it.

[00:21:13.93] Even climate skeptics will go back and say, look, there's a lot we don't know about climate science. It could be a little. It could be a lot. I mean if you listen to Scott Pruitt at the EPA, he does that, right? This whole uncertainty is an argument used by skeptics. But the reality is that if you're in the risk management business, like Bob was at Goldman, like we are as a society with climate change, uncertainty is the reason that you hedge against risk. Uncertainty is why you want to manage risk. The very fact of uncertainty is what demands the policy response. And so that's how I responded to the conversation with Bob. I was pretty excited.

[00:21:53.33] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:21:57.59] Imagine yourself if you're at a holiday party with the Mother Jones staff and you say, you know, I think gun control is kind of silly. I think the NRA's got a point when they argue that we need to be looser with gun regulation. I think that's the best way to do public safety. Could you imagine what that would do at your holiday party?

[00:22:20.66] Well, when you're amongst conservatives or libertarians and you say, you know, I think that Al Gore was more right than wrong and climate change is a real thing and it's not a conspiracy cooked up by leftists who want to destroy capitalism, and I honestly think that, you know, we need to act if that means using regulations, or taxes, or some other means to get fossil fuels out of this economy on a pretty short order, we've got to do it. Well, you know, that's a pretty strong cup of tea for a lot of my old friends to drink.

[00:22:54.32] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:22:59.55] The fact is is that I became increasingly uncomfortable with my position at the Cato Institute. And so by the spring of 2014, I decided that it was time to liberate myself from the constraints of institutional orthodoxy and to reengage with libertarian friendly rhetoric, not just on climate, but on a whole host of issues.

[00:23:21.15] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:23:36.98] - Jerry Taylor is the only paid climate skeptic who has ever flipped. So why did he knowingly challenge his views on climate change? Why was he receptive to what Jim Hansen, and Jonathan Adler, and Bob Litterman had to say?

[00:23:58.55] - Most people who do what I do for a living, whether on the left or the right, are not in the business of wrestling with the strongest arguments and strongest advocates for the

other side. They are in the business of being the best spokesmen for their cause within their choir.

[00:24:16.79] And I wanted to do something beyond that. And so because I had greater aspirations for myself, it required me to wrestle with the best arguments of the other side. Most skeptics don't know what the best arguments from the other side are. They don't know what the strongest literature is. They don't know what the strongest data and evidence is, because it's irrelevant to them.

[00:24:38.51] If you're all you're doing is talking to people who watch Fox News or read The Wall Street Journal editorial page or look at National Review, it's pretty certain that your crowd is not up on this stuff. As long as you're telling conservatives and Republicans what they want to hear and you say it with brio and with a spirit of decor, and with a healthy dose of snarling about Suzy Cream Cheese and tree huggers, you're probably just fine. You'll be on Tucker Carlson's show, you'll get your job done.

[00:25:09.52] But I didn't want to embarrass myself. And I did not want to be diced and sliced on TV. Now there are a lot of people, they don't mind being humiliated on public television by speaking absolute gibberish. They don't care, because they are playing their role in the script they're given on that show to be the spokesman for the right wing cause. And they don't care if, you know, they don't sound all that smart to smart people, because they don't care about that audience. They only care about the choir audience.

[00:25:41.82] I also was very, very aware of the fact that there were conservatives who trusted me to give them solid information. So if I got a phone call from John Stossel at Fox, or if I got a ring from George Will when he was writing for The Washington Post, and they want to talk about a policy issue in my area, I had a responsibility to give them as bullet proof an argument and as solid a set of data as I possibly could, because they're relying on me. And if I don't do that, and then they go on the air or they go in print, and they offer garbage and they get shredded, then they'll look at that and say, well, how the hell did that happen? How did this garbage get into my column? Oh, it's that guy that I listened to.

[00:26:30.99] - Which is exactly what happened to Jerry that sparked his transformation in the first place. He had parroted a bunk scientific narrative on national television and then felt betrayed by the scientist who had fed it to him. So in a way, it was Jerry's commitment to being a successful climate skeptic that made him open to change. It was precisely because he wanted to persuade people beyond his choir and be a reliable source for conservative pundits that he reread James Hansen's testimony and confronted that climate scientist when it looked right, and was a, shall we say, a inquiring mind doing the due diligence that led him to convincing counterarguments, and what made him reckon not just with his views on climate change, but with his relationship with his views more broadly.

[00:27:32.81] - Most people aren't in the business of looking skeptically at things that they already agree with or want to agree with as they are if they're looking at things they don't agree with they don't want to agree with. That's just motivated cognition. My engines of motivated cognition were on full tilt when I was at the Cato Institute. It turns out if you're really smart,

you've got a high IQ, you're really well read, you can talk yourself into believing a whole lot of crazy. But if you're not so motivated to you know hold a tribal line, then when those engines cut off a little bit, things can become very different.

[00:28:12.70] I was having lunch with a friend of mine, a major climate activist John Passacantando, used to be the president of Greenpeace. And I got to know John when I was on the other side of this debate, because I debated him on TV a lot, too. But turns out, John's a really nice guy. He didn't live too far from me. He liked to bass fish on the Potomac, so we kind of became friends.

[00:28:34.29] And I was chatting with him about the Niskanen Center. I told him I was going to leave the Cato Institute. I was going to start the Niskanen Center. And I told him what issues we'd deal with, but climate wasn't one of them. And he said, Jerry, you really should deal with climate. I mean you've got a whole lot of bad karma and not a whole lot of time to do something about it. And he said, man, life's short. Life's short. Look, you're the best opponent I ever had in this conversation, which means that you have a lot of making up to do. He said, look, do what you want to do, but I think you'd be a happier person if you could engage on the issue that you probably are better equipped to engage on than any of the other issues that you want to invest in at the Niskanen Center.

[00:29:18.90] The reality is is that I was in a position that few people were and that I understood exactly why people gravitate towards climate skepticism on the right. I know climate skeptics really well. I know libertarians pretty well. I conservative Republicans very well. I have a good relationship with a lot of them. And I can sit there with credibility and say, look, I used to believe exactly what you believe. Hell, I wrote your talking points. I know where this comes from. And for 20 odd years, I was there. So I understand exactly. But let me tell you why I'm not there anymore.

[00:29:53.80] I have a unique opportunity to talk to conservatives and right of center political audiences in a way that most people don't. There are plenty of climate skeptics out there. Because of my perch at the Cato Institute, I was one of the more influential of the bunch. I'd been on TV, and radio, and op-ed pages, and Fox News, and the Wall Street Journal, and National Review more times than I can remember.

[00:30:33.78] I wish early in my career, I had done the due diligence with the arguments that I was trafficking in far earlier than I began to undertake that mission. I do regret that. That's something that I feel I have a lot to make up for. So I walked out of that lunch thinking he's right.

[00:31:01.51] - The same day he left the Cato Institute, Jerry started the Niskanen Center, a libertarian think tank that promotes market-based solutions to climate change, primarily through a carbon tax. And in looking to persuade climate skeptics, the Niskanen Center uses what worked for Jerry.

[00:31:20.28] - Our aim is to talk to people who don't agree with us and to make the case for why they ought to entertain changing their minds and agreeing with us, because I think people can be persuaded by good arguments. But you have to understand that you have to frame it in ways that

they can appreciate. You have to make the case with moral and value arguments that speak to them. You will waste your time talking about equity issues to a libertarian who does not care. But they care about other things, so you make the case in a different fashion.

[00:31:51.93] And it turns out that that is a more invigorating and intellectually challenging life than simply one offering an op-ed for National Review every couple of weeks or putting in your once or twice a week appearance at Fox News just to shout with a howler monkeys about how the communists are coming to take your children.

[00:32:15.62] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:32:23.99] It is tremendously liberating to be in a position to argue what you want and to take positions that you're totally comfortable with without having to answer to an administration or a management that you don't agree with. One of the most useful witticisms that I've come across was from CK Chesterton who cautioned against the person of the one book, the person who might read Atlas Shrugged or name a book that is all of the political rage in certain communities, and then they become militant on this. And so Chesterton argued against the person who reads the one book because they will invariably find themselves in a well lit prison cell, in a well lit intellectual prison cell that they can't escape from.

[00:33:23.27] And when we find ourselves using our engines of motivated cognition to stay within the tribe and to constantly police ourself against the possibility of being tempted by heretical thoughts and uncomfortable observations about reality, what we're really doing is arming our inner policeman to keep watch on this penitentiary that we voluntarily locked ourselves into. And one of the reasons why it's been an incredibly invigorating thing for me to be at the Niskanen Center and to have the people around me that I have around me is that it's an incredibly invigorating thing to not be in a penitentiary anymore, to not be in an ideological penitentiary, or some sort of tribal penitentiary.

[00:34:11.05] And I fear that too many people, not just in climate skepticism, and not just on the right, but on the left as well, because they are captured by these dogmatic and ideological loyalties, that they are, in a sense, locking themselves in a rather exhausting jail cell. And they would be far better to let these things go and to think with open minds.

[00:34:38.77] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:34:55.95] - So what is unique about Jerry's story to me is that Jerry Taylor really is this rare bird whose mind was changed by information. Because of motivated cognition, because people can, effectively, basically, find whatever information they want to support whatever it is that they believe, it is rarely the case that people's minds are changed by information. And it is really a testament, I would say, to how ruthless of a critical thinker, or shall we say inquiring mind, Jerry Taylor is.

[00:35:33.33] And actually I just want to share a little. When I asked him if the Niskanen Center calls itself a libertarian think tank, or how they kind of accommodate the nuance that they bring to libertarianism, he gave me this amazing spiel that some people there call themselves

neoliberarians. And some people are liberal-tarians. And some people are neoliberals and ordoliberals. And clearly they are just a refreshingly critically thinking bunch who are, like he says, not people of one book but are really thinking through things on a case by case or policy by policy basis.

[00:36:13.98] And, yeah, I almost was going to title the piece the liberated libertarian. But, yeah, I mean I talk to people who change all the time. And it really is this rare and unique and wonderful and fits with Inquiring Minds very well story that he was moved by solid arguments, by solid evidence and information.

[00:36:38.79] - Yeah. I think for me, one of the most interesting parts of the interview is when he talks about the process of actually coming to this realization where he starts to see how other individuals who are climate skeptics are cherry picking data, are quoting studies that are not really well done or are reports. And I think it takes a real sort of shift in mind to recognize those kinds of tricks and tools, because for so many people, that is just the way that they do research. And it's hard for them to sort of recognize that they are cherry picking data. You know?

[00:37:16.80] It's like they're so compelled by that one piece of evidence that they just keep coming back to it and saying, no, but, look at this piece of evidence. Look at this data point. And here he is saying, look, you know, a lot of the stuff that we've been quoting comes from shoddy research. And when you look at this consensus that things sort of come out in the other way.

[00:37:36.48] The other thing that really fascinated me was the fact that he was making a very economic argument. And that to me was really nuanced, too. I think a lot of people, as I imagine, when they come to sort of fanaticism about a particular point of view do it from a less of mathematical or rational place.

[00:37:57.30] So I liked the fact that when he sort of started to realize that economically this is really going to have a huge impact. And as you mentioned in your narration, this is something that is already impacting all of us in ways that aren't always obvious. To me, that was an interesting discovery from his perspective, because it's subtle. It's not something that's like wildfires in California that are the worst they've been since recorded history. That seems obvious. You know? And you see these large catastrophic events, it's easy to say, OK, maybe there's something to it. Even if those events actually might not be directly related to climate change.

[00:38:35.46] It's a lot harder to sort of see the forest for the trees, which is kind of what he's doing with the economic analysis where he's sort of seeing the slow shift, the slow impact that is much harder to recognize. And that was one of the most compelling parts for him of why he changed his mind.

[00:38:55.29] - Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean, that was why that moved him, because, to Jonathan Adler's point, even if what the skeptics are saying are right, that still doesn't defeat the case. There is still a case for climate action. And Katharine Hayhoe talks about this, too. We oftentimes get really hung up about the science. Actually, Jerry talks about this, too. But I think

he's quoting Bob Litterman that we're in this quote unquote "hot war" about the most likely outcome.

[00:39:29.80] But that's almost a detour in a way, or that almost kind of keeps us mired in this back and forth tug of war, because all you really need once is a distribution of risk. And once you see that there is risk, then there is a case for action. And you can just leave the mess, the hot war, of what is the most likely outcome or getting mired in the science. You can kind of step away from that and start talking about, OK, what do we do about this? Because we actually do need to do something about this anyway.

[00:40:04.84] - Yeah. I think a lot of times when I do talk to individuals who are skeptical of the impact that climate change is going to have on our future, the first thing that they say is, like, look, if the IPCC report is true, if these scientists who recently came out and said, oh, it's going to be on the low end of our predictions, then who cares? It's not going to have an economical impact. And Jerry came to a very different conclusion. And so I think that that's, in some ways, a harder place to get to than simply like, OK, I acknowledge the fact that there seem to be too many environmental things that are going on at the time for this just to be coincidence.

[00:40:43.60] - One lingering question for me is I would love to know if there are people that Jerry kind of brought along with him on his journey-- people who he first convinced of climate skepticism and then convinced of the case for climate action.

[00:41:05.05] - Yeah. Like as he talked about he's the guy at the party that has bad body odor or nobody wants to talk to him, because he's now-- and so it would be really interesting to sort of get a survey of the individuals who did follow him who were influenced by him when he was expressing skepticism on climate change. And what do they think now? And did they disown him as a sell out?

[00:41:34.52] - Well, actually on that-- so there's so much more to his story, obviously, that could not be fit into the piece. But one kind of juicy nugget that didn't make it is his brother, actually, he kind of parlayed his brother into a role at the Heartland Institute. And his brother has kind of made-- kind of taken the Heartland Institute to kind of this prominent place. I think it is like the most-- kind of like the leading think tank of climate skepticism. And he recommended his brother for the role that his brother is now in. And his brother is deep in that. And so Jerry and his brother just can't actually talk about climate change to each other.

[00:42:25.25] - Wow.

[00:42:25.49] - I mean they have a relationship. And they see each other. And they've just kind of agreed to not talk about it. But they are very much on very different sides in a very, very public way.

[00:42:39.20] I mean, for me, the broader implication of this story and one that I think both the Inquiring Minds and the Reckonings audiences can really appreciate is that along with tackling climate denial and politically motivated skepticism at the level of the views in and of themselves, at the level of whether it's a scientific evidence or the economic arguments, we really need to be

tackling at the level of our relationship with our views. You know? And you could say, like, inoculating ourselves with genuine skepticism and with critical thinking, which is portable beyond the realm of climate change and increasingly essential in our post truth moment.

[00:43:31.15] - Yeah. I mean, in some ways Jerry was the perfect setup for having a kind of reckoning, because he was in the business of critical thinking. You know? He was in the business of making an argument, in the business of debating something that was out there. So part of his job was to continue to collect evidence and research.

[00:43:48.01] And the fact that he started to see that the bulk of the evidence was not on his side anymore is a testament of his thoroughness. I think for most of us, we don't often have that many opportunities to continue to collect evidence once we've formed an opinion.

[00:44:02.96] - Yeah.

[00:44:03.16] - I mean, usually, when we're not sure about something, we go and we research it. And then once we are satisfied with the research and we come to an opinion, we don't revisit it very often. So that's one of the lessons maybe here is that when there is-- when you do hold a strong opinion that does seem to continue to remain controversial, maybe we do need to do periodic checks to make sure that our opinion still aligns with the available evidence.

[00:44:31.33] - Yeah. That's a great little call to action. All right, everyone. Let's all take some thing, something we believe that is challenged out there and maybe do a little due diligence of our own.

[00:44:46.93] - Well, Stevie, thank you so much for bringing this story to Inquiring Minds.

[00:44:50.72] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:44:53.82] So that's it for another episode. I want to thank you for joining us for this installment of Inquiring Minds. So we'd like to thank our supporters on our Patreon campaign, especially David Noelle, Clark Lindgren, Stephan Meyer-Ewald, Michael [INAUDIBLE], Kyle [INAUDIBLE] Jonathan [INAUDIBLE], Eric Clark, Jordan Millar, [INAUDIBLE], Sean Johnson, and Nick Cadillac. You can visit our website at inquiring.show. And you can support us at [Patreon.com/inquiringminds](https://www.patreon.com/inquiringminds). You can also find us on Twitter at [@inquiringshow](https://twitter.com/inquiringshow) and Facebook. And you can send us comments, feedback, future guest ideas, your own recording, or anything else you'd like to contact contact@inquiring.show.

[00:45:31.50] Inquiring Minds is produced by Adam Isaak. And this episode was also co-produced by Stevie Lepp. In cooperation with the Climate Desk, a journalistic collaboration and partnership with many media outlets. Our music is provided by award winning producer Rhian Sheehan.

[00:45:44.82] Reckonings would love to thank Helena de Groot, Vika Aronson, Phil Groman, and Patricia Adler for their editorial guidance. Louisa Tavlas for coordinating our conversation

with Jerry. And of course, to Jerry Taylor, himself, for having the courage to release himself from his tribal penitentiary and live his values.

[00:46:04.68] Next up on Reckonings, we'll hear from someone who helped incite those howler monkeys to howl. The young man who was the protege of the late Fox News chairman Roger Ailes.

[00:46:17.44] - We're your hosts for this week. I'm Indre Viskontas. You can find me on Twitter at @indrevis.

[00:46:21.63] - I'm Stevie Lepp. You can find Reckonings on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts, on Facebook at facebook.com/reckonings, and at reckonings.show

[00:46:33.66] [MUSIC PLAYING]