

Johnson & Phillips Discuss Efforts of Problem Solvers Caucus to Find Common Ground

WASHINGTON, DC — Two members of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus appeared before a virtual meeting of The Ripon Society and Franklin Center this past Thursday, delivering remarks about their efforts to bridge the political divide in Congress and areas where common ground can be achieved in the coming year.

The members were Republican Congressman Dusty Johnson, who was elected in 2018 and represents the At-Large District of South Dakota in the U.S. House of Representatives, and Democratic Congressman Dean Phillips, who represents the 3rd District of Minnesota in the House and was also elected in 2018. Johnson spoke first, kicking off his remarks by recalling the last COVID relief package which was enacted in December, and the unheralded role his colleague played in passing the bill.

“Folks like Senators Manchin and Cassidy and Collins deserve a ton of credit for finally pulling together the COVID-19 relief bill,” Johnson said. “But I think the snowball at the top of the hill that triggered that avalanche didn’t come from Cassidy or Collins or Manchin. It came from Dean Phillips. And it was for months prior to that, that Dean reached out — called me and other members, both Democrats and Republicans, of the Problem Solvers Caucus — and just said, ‘It is absurd that Nancy won’t come off \$2 or 3 trillion, and Mitch won’t come off \$500 billion. This is no way to run a railroad.’”

“Dean was a pain in the ass. He was insistent. And he had a righteous indignation — not an anger that all too often characterizes our modern politics. It was not anger. It was not hate. It was a righteous indignation. He knew we could do better. He had also taken the time to develop personal relationships with both Democrats and Republicans alike. He had taken the time to give us a sense of what his soul was like so that we trusted him. And frankly, it was the House that first unveiled a \$908 billion package which ultimately the Senate picked up and, as even they will admit, used as their framework. So I am grateful to him — a great American and a great Congressman.”

As for where bipartisan agreement might be found in 2021, Johnson pointed to several key areas.

“I think the Democrats will work to shore up the ACA,” he observed, “and there will certainly be some Republicans that will be interested in doing that with them. There will of course be areas like WRDA and NDAA, which are areas of traditional bipartisan agreement. I’d also be remiss if I didn’t mention infrastructure. I won’t belabor that because everybody’s been talking about that. But one component of particular importance is infrastructure broadband.”



Reps. Dean Phillips (left) and Dusty Johnson (right)

Johnson said he also hoped consensus could be reached on criminal justice reform.

“Congress took a step forward two and a half years ago with the First Step Act,” he stated. “It was very modest. If we can get our friends in the Democratic leadership not to overreach, I think there is a massive, important and substantial victory to be won for this country in criminal justice reform at the federal level.”

Phillips opened his remarks the same way that Johnson did — with praise for his colleague across the aisle.

“Congress is filled with people who come in on a search and destroy mission, to destroy those who look at things differently and have different life experiences,” the Minnesota lawmaker stated. “One of the great blessings of my service so far has been to befriend Dusty Johnson, a man of such integrity and honor, intelligence.

I’ve learned a lot from Dusty. I hope to learn more, and these are the friendships from which I think the country can thrive. We are just one example, but I believe we all have a responsibility to take steps in this direction if we are going to realize what I think is the best of America.”

Phillips then turned his attention to an event that represents the complete opposite of what is best about America — the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th.

“It was a moment that I know Dusty and I and our fellow Members will never forget,” he stated. “It reminds us all of the fragility of democracy generally, and in the United States of America, more specifically. And if we do not unify collectively to preserve our Republic, we’re going to be subject to more January 6ths in the future. It is a virus. Ironically in a year that we had COVID, we also have a virus of mean spiritedness, of disdain, and misinformation. That’s not a political statement. It’s one that we have to reckon with. We’re not going to legislate our way out of this. To the contrary, we have to inspire one another to do better. And that’s my mission.”

It is also one of the reasons Phillips joined the Problem Solvers Caucus.

“If we led the House,” he stated, “it would be transformational.

**“If we do not unify
collectively to preserve our
Republic, we’re going to
be subject to more January
6ths in the future.”**

It would be exactly, I believe, what our Founders had intended. We debate, we deliberate, we sometimes argue, and we sometimes get frustrated. But we respect one another. We bring different life experiences and policy ideas to the table. We represent very different constituencies, but we build trust. And as we have seen between leaders McConnell, Schumer, McCarthy, and Pelosi, the absence of trust is as dangerous of a virus as COVID or misinformation. And that's why the Problem Solvers Caucus gives me hope.

"As I've told our Co-chairs, Tom Reed and Josh Gottheimer, I think it's time that we start acting more like a party than just a caucus. Because conversation is wonderful and trust is a great foundation, but ultimately if we don't start changing the way that Congress operates, we will have missed the most important work of our lifetimes and the one that would leave the best legacy for all of us. And that is our mission. That's Dusty's mission. That's my mission, to affect the social design of Congress, the physical design of Congress, and the organizational design of Congress. It's woefully broken."

Following their remarks, the two lawmakers were asked a number of questions, including one about the toxic environment in Congress and how a sense of trust can be restored on Capitol Hill.

"It starts with kindergarten lessons," Phillips said, responding first. What I find so strange about the United States Congress is first and foremost how human it is. But it's the lack of basic kindergarten lessons that every single one of us remember. Listen to one another. Respect one another. Celebrate differences. Learn from people who see things differently.

"That's where the Problem Solvers come in. We have dinners together, Democrats and Republicans breaking bread, getting to know each other. We sit at the table. We do debate. It is the only one where I actually talk policy in meaningful ways with colleagues on both sides of the aisle. So it is possible, but I don't think it's going to happen until we see changes in the leadership on both sides of the aisle, in both chambers, and bring a new spirit. We are maybe three or four seats away from that. How we get there is awfully complicated. But it's possible. And I'm sure not going to rest until we do."

Johnson agreed, and pointed to some specific steps that can be taken to rebuild relationships and heal some of the mistrust that currently exists in the House.

"I think the magnetometers outside the chamber are devoid of any security rationale, and actual intelligence," he stated bluntly. "I have had technical professionals within the Capitol security apparatus admit, not in so many words, that they are not tactically justifiable. And I think it has a toxic impact. So that would be number one.

"Number two, we need to blow up the orientation of new members. The way it is now is still segregated to an alarming degree by party. It should be the second or third week before people even know who the Democrats or Republicans are.

"I also think the January 6th Task Force should be evenly divided by party. Those thugs certainly would have strung up anybody with these pins without asking what their party was. And I think it is a growing infection as Dean talked about that could kill not only our Republic, but also the Republican and

on the deck on that."

Johnson and Phillips were also asked their thoughts about whether bipartisan agreement can be reached on another critical challenge facing our country — climate change.

"Within the Problem Solvers," Johnson said, "I think you could get a very high level of engagement and interest. I think you could get near unanimity within the group that carbon is an issue, that there is a role for American leadership in the world on this issue, and that there is some need for timely action.

"If I'm bullish on the willingness of the Problem Solvers to act, I am still somewhat bearish on the likelihood of that action being replicated in a bipartisan way. I don't know that Speaker Pelosi can afford to bring a climate solutions bill to the floor that would appeal to me. And I want to address climate. I really do. I just think it will be infinitely easier for her to get to 218 among her own members than it will be by crossing the aisle. And I think that's a damn shame."

Phillips concurred.

"I think that's a fair assessment," he stated. "In fact, I would argue that climate policy is no longer domestic policy by definition. It's global policy. To have these debates and deliberations only in the United States is a mistake, because if we don't do it in concert with our friends and even our adversaries around the world, I think it will all be for naught and it actually will take a toll on America. I happen to be a fan of a carbon fee and dividend, a conservative notion, of course. I think that's a darn good start. Not to redistribute income, but to actually take the proceeds and return it right back to taxpayers, especially those who would be disadvantaged by modestly higher prices for carbon fuels.

"And I would say that the Problem Solvers Caucus is better prepared than any other body in Congress to have these conversations. One of our aspirations is to start engaging in more proactive policy creation in the Problem Solvers Caucus. That means staffing. It means we need resources. It means we need the intention. We already have a working group that is dedicated to the issue. My hope is as we ramp up our resources and our membership and our intention over the next couple of years and beyond that, we will be producers of a policy that has a bipartisan genesis. And therein lies the opportunity — if you join together during the takeoff, the likelihood of a safe landing is much higher. The only way that's going to happen under the current construct and under the current conditions in Congress is through the Problem Solvers."

Founded in 1978, The Franklin Center for Global Policy Exchange is a non-partisan, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization committed to enhancing global understanding of important international issues. The Franklin Center brings together Members of the U.S. Congress and their international parliamentary counterparts as well as experts from the Diplomatic corps, foreign officials, senior private sector representatives, scholars, and other public policy experts. Through regular conferences and events where leading international opinion leaders share ideas, the Franklin Center promotes enlightened, balanced, and unbiased international policy discussion on major international issues.

For more information on the organization, please visit its website at www.franklincenter.us. **FC**