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## Donald Trump's Cabinet Bodes Ill for the Planet

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# Donald Trump's cabinet bodes ill for the planet

The president-elect's appointments make it clear that we cannot rely on the government to protect the planet.

Lauren Carasik

21 December 2016

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President-elect Donald Trump's cabinet is shaping up as a nightmare for environmentalists and others committed to bold action on climate change. [Trump tapped](#) Rex Tillerson, CEO of ExxonMobil, the biggest publicly trading oil company in the world, as secretary of state, where he would head the agency in charge of negotiating international climate agreements.

His selection [rounds out a cabinet](#) filled with climate sceptics, and signals a resurgence of oil and gas power inside the Beltway that is poised to dictate foreign policy while ignoring the staggering social costs of carbon.

Trump recently reaffirmed his hostility to climate protections, vowing again to "cancel the restrictions on the production of American energy including shale, oil, natural gas and clean, beautiful coal".

Kathy Mulvey, the climate accountability campaign manager at the Union of Concerned Scientists, denounced the choice. "[T]here's a real concern that President-elect Trump is creating a government of, by, and for the oil and gas industry," Mulvey said. "The analogy of the nomination of Rex Tillerson for secretary of state would be akin to nominating a tobacco CEO as surgeon general," she added.

Scott Pruitt and Rick Perry, selected to head the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Energy (DOE) respectively, are avowed climate sceptics.

Pruitt, the Oklahoma attorney general and loyal friend to the oil and gas industries, is set to take the helm of an agency whose legacy he appears determined to dismantle. [Touting himself](#) as a leading opponent of the EPA's "activist agenda", Pruitt helped spearhead state-led opposition to the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan, which is key to meeting the country's commitments under the Paris climate agreement.

Pruitt wrote in the National Review that "scientists continue to disagree about the degree and extent of global warming and its connection to the actions of mankind".

Moreover, former Texas governor Rick Perry will head the DOE, an agency he once vowed to abolish, after committing the memorable faux pas of forgetting its name in a presidential debate.

Perry, who hails from a state with a powerful energy sector, sits on the board of Energy Transfer Partners, developer of the controversial Dakota Access Pipeline. Both are expected to advance Trump's anti-regulatory, pro-extraction agenda.

### **Fox guarding the henhouse?**

Tillerson is cast as a pragmatic, experienced businessman who possesses a skillset seamlessly transferrable to statecraft. Yet, the oil magnate's globetrotting has been in service of corporate profit, not advancing the public good.

The elevation of an oil baron as the nation's top diplomat lays bare Trump's priorities. As Steve Coll observes in *The New Yorker*, "American power is best understood as a raw, neocolonial exercise in securing resources." Tillerson's ties with Vladimir Putin, and by extension with Russia's energy industry, have caused consternation, and he has promoted the company's interests abroad despite the [significant human costs](#) of doing so. Activists are alarmed by Tillerson's presumed loyalties and his company's conduct on climate change.

ExxonMobil has come under fire for covering up what its scientists have long known about the dangers posed by carbon emissions. Separate reports by the *Los Angeles Times* and *InsideClimate News* last year prompted the attorneys general of Massachusetts and New York [to investigate](#) whether ExxonMobil committed consumer or securities fraud by failing to disclose to its shareholders what it knew about climate change.

The company claims it has not suppressed evidence of climate change, and Tillerson conceded it was real shortly after he ascended to the company's top position in 2006.

But the oil giant is aggressively fighting the investigation into its conduct, calling the effort politically motivated and even suing the attorney generals for violating the company's free speech and other constitutional rights.

Others have joined the effort to hold the oil giant to account. On December 14, the Pace Environmental Law Clinic [filed a petition](#) on behalf of the Waterkeeper Alliance to suspend ExxonMobil from contracts with the government, citing its "pervasive pattern of deceptive and damaging conduct related to environmental issues generally and climate change issues in particular".

Dispirited activists derive some small satisfaction from the fact that Tillerson may have to testify in confirmation hearings about what Exxon knew and when, potentially circumventing the company's obstructionism.

Tillerson espouses faith in technological advances and adaptation to remediate deleterious climate effects, and promotes the continued use of fossil fuels as a bridge to more sustainable resources. In so doing, he avoids the urgency of immediate action to curb emissions by deferring to the forces of the free market to fix the problem.

The company also justifies cheap energy as the key to alleviating poverty. Yet some anti-poverty institutions have a different view, including the [World Bank](#), which concluded that "avoiding climate risks is the route to sustainable development".

ExxonMobil endorses the Paris climate agreement, along with a carbon tax, yet it continues to support institutions and politicians that oppose both.

### **It already begun**

The chasm between words and deeds highlights the fact that it derives much of its income from the continued extraction of fossil fuels despite the imperative of keeping most of those resources in the ground.

Trump's transition team raised yet more alarm bells when it sent a questionnaire to the DOE asking for the names of people who had worked on initiatives to curb greenhouse emissions. An unbowed DOE refused to comply. After ensuing outrage, the Trump team claimed the [questionnaire was unauthorised](#), but the chilling effect is clear.

The Washington Post reported that concerned scientists "have begun a feverish attempt to copy reams of government data onto independent servers in hopes of safeguarding it from any political interference".

Tillerson's relative moderation cannot mask the irony that one of the cabinet nominees with the least extreme position on climate made his fortune by extracting carbon fuels.

Trump's appointments make it clear that we cannot rely on the government to protect the planet: that stewardship will be up to civil society.

*Lauren Carasik is a clinical professor of law and the Director of the International Human Rights Clinic at Western New England University School of Law. She has provided legal support for the water protectors.*

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