

Turning Opposition Into Consensus

JANUARY 2021

Featuring:

Claire McCaskill, U.S. Senator 2007-2018

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TOM HOARE: Hey, everyone. It's Tom Hoare. Welcome back to BNY Mellon Perspectives, our podcast series where we bring you the leaders and the conversations that are shaping our financial world and beyond.

This week in the United States, we will inaugurate our 46th president. It goes without saying that we are living through, to say the least, a tumultuous period in our history. President-elect Biden will take the oath in the midst of a once-in-a-century pandemic and public health crisis and a country that is dangerously divided politically – to say nothing of an economy that will demand immediate focus and attention by the incoming administration. We face a myriad of challenges and solving them will take leadership and bipartisanship and cooperation that, on just about every issue, has been missing in Washington for many, many years.

So it's in that context that we invited former U.S. Senator Claire McCaskill to join us for this episode of the podcast. Now, let's be clear. There are plenty of platforms where you can find political discussions and hear opinions and commentary on politics – including, of course, on the horrific attack on the Capitol earlier this month. But here, what we tried to do instead was to have a leadership discussion. What can we expect in terms of where the incoming administration will focus their efforts, and what will it take to overcome the tribalism and division of this moment to move the country forward on issues that demand a new era of leadership, a new approach to leadership?

We also got a chance to hear from Senator McCaskill about her own leadership journey. She's the first and only woman ever elected to the Senate from Missouri, and when she left the Senate in 2018, she was the top-ranking Democrat on the Senate Homeland Security Committee and a senior member of the Armed Services Committee. And, of course, she has the perspective of knowing President-elect Biden quite well, having served with him in the Senate for a number of years. She's interviewed in this episode by BNY Mellon Head of Government Affairs Jennifer Xi.

So we hope you enjoy the discussion and the episode. As always, listen, rate, review – through Apple Podcasts, through Spotify – wherever you listen to your podcasts. We're looking forward to continuing this series in 2021 with hopefully some great episodes and a great lineup. And we thank you for continuing to join us on this journey. Let's get to it.

JENNIFER XI: Senator McCaskill, thank you for joining us today.

CLAIRE McCASKILL: My pleasure, Jennifer.

JENNIFER XI: Senator McCaskill, let's start with your perspective on where the U.S. government is today. You've described yourself as a Missouri moderate, known for working across the aisle to bring bipartisan initiatives to bear, to work through whatever the political climate might be and to move forward with some solutions. The current political climate, however, is more polarized than at nearly any time in our nation's history. Is there still a place for moderates?

CLAIRE McCASKILL: I actually believe there is, and I think there's a hunger for it. And I know this – there's a hunger among my former colleagues to actually legislate. One of the byproducts of the last 10 years in the United States Senate – and I'm speaking of the Senate because I'm more knowledgeable about the Senate and how it used to work and how it works now. I do think that Senator Schumer understands that committees want to have a role in shaping legislation and that senators want to be able to offer amendments and debate legislation and vote on legislation.

And since the Senate is divided 50-50, don't get me wrong – the Democrats are going to have massive amounts of power as to what they vote on. But having said that, it still will be limited by their ability to get 60 votes on most matters.

Now, we'll have some reconciliation that we'll get on tax and probably some other things. I think they'll get two shots at reconciliation this calendar year. So that would just be a majority vote, but the remaining legislative items, you're going to have to find some people that are willing to cross the aisle. And I think there's a bunch of folks who are ready to do that.

JENNIFER XI: So, I definitely want to get to some of the concrete legislation that Congress and the administration can pass. But before we do, I wanted to talk a little bit more about your approaches to leadership, and how you can get things done in a polarized environment. Throughout your career, you've been in positions where you were in the minority, as a woman in a predominantly male field, and as a Democrat in an increasingly Republican state. How did those experiences help you lead in a way that brings people together? And how can others do the same?

CLAIRE McCASKILL: Well, first, I think if I were to say some of the principles that I tried to adhere to, one is to listen carefully, particularly to people whom I assume are going to disagree with me. Listen carefully to what they say, and then carefully communicate after carefully listening to those areas that we agree on.

And that's true whether I'm in a town hall in deeply red rural Missouri, or whether I am sitting on the Senate floor knee to knee with a Republican Senator. Listen, and then find the things you agree on and then work out from there. It's not complicated. It's sometimes means it takes longer. It sometimes means that you don't get everything you want.

And I see a number of areas where that is going to be possible going forward. There'll be some areas that won't be possible in this, especially the challenge we have with us agreeing on what the facts are, but there's still going to be areas where I think that kind of exchange of ideas and coming up with a set of legislative goals that frankly, most Americans agree with.

JENNIFER XI: I really appreciate your perspective on finding common ground. It's something you've done a lot in your career, and something that your former colleagues will need to do in the coming months. Any advice for them?

CLAIRE McCASKILL: Well, there's several things that I think helped. One was to build up trust. If you're working with someone, you don't throw them under the bus. And I still have very strong relationships with a number of my Republican colleagues that I worked with. And there was a variety of them in terms of their ideology. I think that's part of it. I think part of it is being willing to concede that you're not going to get everything you want at the beginning, but let's figure out what we can both give up, so therefore, we find what we can hold onto.

I also think it's important for both Democrats and Republicans to maybe go outside their comfort zone in terms of typical issues. I had a lot of success working on government contracting, especially at the

Pentagon. This was not something most senators were interested in, and it's complicated. So I found the more I learned about that subject, the more I knew about it, the more I was able to move the needle towards reforms that could really make a difference. And the senators began to trust that my knowledge around that subject was such that I was not trying to lead anyone astray. I was just trying to improve the way the Pentagon bought stuff.

And doing those kinds of issues that are not as quote unquote, "sexy," that don't grab the six o'clock news, that's the part of government service I think that can really make a difference if you really have people that have a servant's heart, instead of people that just have blind ambition.

That's how you rebuild the trust of people in this country, is that they see that their elected officials are trying to do things to make their government services better. Sometimes it's just as simple as focusing on one area of constituent service. Whether it is broadband service in rural areas of our country or whether it is making sure that veterans are aware of what they're entitled to, and that they can get it efficiently. There's a long list of things that are never going to have people lining up outside the hearing door, that are never going to be leading the six o'clock news, but that help people. And the people you help notice. And if you just are about the soundbite and the precedent, we're going to do a lot of churning and people are going to become more and more cynical, and our democracy is going to be in more and more trouble.

JENNIFER XI: Let me just ask one more question about trust, because we're a 236-year-old institution and trust is very important to us. It's the bedrock of our reputation. What can institutions beyond the government, such as the media, do to rebuild trust in our country?

CLAIRE McCASKILL: I wish I knew the answer to that. I wish I had a really snappy comeback that we could just do A, B and C. Here's the problem. When I was a kid, my mom and dad used to have us watch the six o'clock news, the national news, and it was either Walter Cronkite or Huntley and Brinkley. And we would hear the facts, and then we would sit down, the TV would go off, we'd sit down to dinner and we'd talk about it.

Now people go to sources of information, not for the facts, but for affirmation. They don't want to be informed. They want to be told they're right. And listen, the internet is good for a lot of things. I mean, we have amazing amount of information, it's been an economic boon that our country probably didn't see coming in terms of what it's meant for our economy. But it is a big problem that we've got to figure out that if people are allowed to just go to their corner of the internet and listen to nonsense, and this is true on both the left and the right, then we are never going to have a shared set of facts.

And how are we ever going to get to a shared set of values if we can't even agree what the facts are? It's a big problem for the way our media is now. And I think it's going to mean some education reform, how we teach young people to get good information. How do we teach them to get off TikTok and read some newspapers that have editors, where there is a requirement to do so. You can read newspapers with different ideology. That's fine. But if there's editors that are making reporters fact check things, that really matters.

JENNIFER XI: So on that, what are some of the areas that we can all agree on? Where do you think are some concrete steps we can take to move forward? There's a lot that we can improve in this country.

CLAIRE McCASKILL: Well, there is. And I think, well, first I think the president-elect, I think President Biden will begin on COVID right away, and there will be some economic relief and some spending, government spending, I think around a more robust vaccination process to get us past the problem of COVID and maybe some more direct relief, particularly to small businesses and middle-class families and those people who are really struggling in terms of health insurance and so forth.

Then I think the other big thing that we could really get a lot of bipartisan support for, that would be very stimulative, that would be good for the economy, would be an infrastructure deal. And I would look to see one of the reconciliation bills being an infrastructure deal, and I would look for some of the focus of that infrastructure deal being on green energy, along with roads and bridges and other things. But I think that is something that you could get as most Americans know it's needed. Our interest rates are very low right now. I don't think the Republicans can really get much resonance with all of a sudden having a new found affection for fiscal constraint. I think there'll be enough of them that we'll want to see this kind of spending happen. So I think that's one area.

I think a couple of other areas that come to mind, I think there's 60 votes for some kind of gun safety legislation. I think there's 60 votes for some kind of campaign finance reform, and doing something about prescription drug prices. Those four areas, I think you get upwards of 75 people, 75% of Americans agreeing with them.

JENNIFER XI: And you know, on the economy, Americans are polarized on so many issues, but one issue where there is pretty broad agreement is concern over COVID and the effects on the economy. You know, you've talked a little bit about infrastructure, about a further stimulus bill. What are some key areas that require commitment of the private sector and where the private sector can help?

CLAIRE McCASKILL: Well, I do think that the private sector should be looking to ways they can help

on the green energy piece. Frankly, I believe the corporate sector has taken more of a leadership role when it comes to climate change than the public sector has in many ways. I think there are corporate leaders in this country who see the writing on the wall, that understand that this is not something that should be going forward, that it is the future. So I think I see leadership in the corporate area around that.

And you know, Jennifer, one thing I want to bring up about the corporate area is I hope the Trump era taught corporate leadership one important principle. They shouldn't be making their decisions about who they support based on what party people are. They should be making their decisions about who they support based on people who run for office and their track record. Are they reasonable? Are they going to try to find middle ground? Do they understand the importance of the free market economy and trade and businesses in terms of how people in this country thrive and how our economy stays strong?

I think there's been a tendency in corporate America to play red shirt, blue shirt, and that didn't turn out so well this last time. I think you ended up with people in offices that had been supported largely by corporate America that are irresponsible about how they're handling their jobs to find common ground and actually try to solve really hard problems, rather than just doing political posturing.

JENNIFER XI: As we wrap up here today, I've been reflecting on the things that give me hope as we enter into this new year. I was really struck by some of the stories you told in your book, "Plenty Ladylike," about your experience of being one of the only women in the room in your early career. And I was really inspired by the way you overcame that challenge through your ambition and your political savvy. How do you feel when you see so many women succeeding now in government?

CLAIRE McCASKILL: Yeah, I'm so blessed because I have had a front row seat to an awful lot of change in this country around women serving in political jobs.

I remember when Sandra Day O'Connor, I was a young prosecutor doing felony trial work in the courtroom when Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed to the Supreme Court. And she was the first woman I'd ever seen in a black robe that wasn't in the church choir. There were no women judges in the courthouse where I worked. There were male judges that used to make me go into the bathroom and put on a wraparound skirt because they wouldn't allow even a formal work pantsuit in the courtroom.

And I look now at Vice President-elect Kamala Harris in her pantsuits and her Converse tennis shoes and her background that is so American in terms of where she comes from, and I realize the kind of

progress we've made.

JENNIFER XI: Well, Senator McCaskill, thank you so much for your time today and all you've shared with us. I really appreciate it.

CLAIRE McCASKILL: You bet. Thank you. It's great to be with you.

TOM HOARE: Hey everyone, Tom here again. Thanks again for joining. I hope you enjoyed that conversation. As I said at the top, keep listening on Apple Podcasts, on Spotify, or wherever you consume your podcasts. Most importantly, if you're willing, leave a review or a rating. And tell us your feedback. You can find us on social media – LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and bnymellon.com. Thanks again for joining. We'll see you on the next episode.

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