Alex Trembath: Welcome to another episode of Breakthrough Dialogues, the podcast for pragmatists and problem solvers, brought to you by the Breakthrough Institute. I'm Alex Trembath, your host, and deputy director here at Breakthrough. For this episode, I sat down with Breakthrough's own Jameson McBride. Jameson is an energy analyst here at Breakthrough, and has written on clean energy standards, nuclear economics and American energy and politics. One of his most recent and most interesting pieces of writing is a post that Jameson wrote on the Green New Deal, which is in the air here at Breakthrough and really anywhere that you are involved in environmental policy and politics.

Alex Trembath: I just want to sit down with Jameson, who I think has a really clear view on what the Green New Deal at large is, what it could mean, not just for environmental policy but for American politics and legislating in general, and where it's situated and contextualized in the longer history of American environmentalism. I think it's a really great conversation. I think you'll enjoy it.

Alex Trembath: Jameson, thanks for joining me.

Jameson McBride: Thank you for having me.

Alex Trembath: So Green New Deal, we're talking now about an actual legislative action, we're talking about real things happening in Congress. We're talking about a resolution that was introduced in the last few weeks as of this recording. We're talking about an FAQ, we're talking about ideas for a bill or multiple bills. We're talking about very much a moving target. It's hard to pin down what the Green New Deal even is. I want to ask you for your perspective right off the bat. In the broadest possible terms with the most historical context you can offer, when we are talking about the Green New Deal, what are we talking about?

Jameson McBride: Sure. I think in the broadest terms possible, it means a government intervention into the economy to try to deal with climate change, and it means specifically a federal government intervention into the economy. The New Deal originally wasn't a single legislative action, it was a whole series of administrative actions and legislative actions, and it broadly transformed the role that the government has in the American economy. And that was enacted in response to a very clear and present crisis, which was the Great Depression, and the people who are behind the Green New Deal think that a similar scale action is needed in response to climate change. It's less clear I think to everyone else that it's as
clear and present a danger as the Great Depression was, but they’re aiming for a
similar scale action.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, I want to return to that notion of how salient the crisis is to the general
public, because I think that's super important. It's often elided in conversations
about the Green New Deal. But do you buy that in general, like can this Green
New Deal be like the original New Deal?

Jameson McBride: Yeah, it could. Legally, it could happen and the government has I think a lot
more ability to intervene in the American economy than it has, especially in
recent decades. People identify that there's been this sort of retreat from the
government's role in the economy, since about the 70s or 80s. Some people call
that the neoliberal turn or something like that. And regardless of what you call
it, I think it's pretty clear that it has happened, and government programs have
stopped expanding at least, and in some cases they've reversed. I think a big
part of the Green New Deal is reminding people of what the government can
do. The intervention that I made on our blog was designed to tell people that
other countries' governments have already done this. They've already had these
big national interventions into their energy systems, and they've resulted in a lot
of decarbonization and a lot of clean energy.

Alex Trembath: It's oftentimes not even an intervention, it's just the way that the energy system
is run from the beginning in a lot of other western countries.

Jameson McBride: Right. Of course, there's no such thing as a free market in energy. There’s no
natural state of nature for energy markets. These are things that we've been
constructing for as long as we've had them. And even in the US, with the way
that regulated utilities are set up, they're established as essentially government-
regulated monopolies. The government has been in this game for a long time,
and the question isn't so much whether the government should intervene, the
question is how the government intervenes. And the Green New Deal at least in
its broadest possible terms, it wants to make the government push the
American economy in all the ways it can toward decarbonization and toward
reducing our emissions in the long term.

Alex Trembath: That's one of the things that's super interesting to me about this, again trying to
put the Green New Deal in the longer historical context of American
environmental politics. You wind the clock back about a decade to the Waxman-
Markey cap and trade bill that was being debated in Congress in 2009, 2010
timeframe. And at that point, you were talking, "Ew, Waxman-Markey." There
was a lot in it, but fundamentally, it was a cap and trade program for the United
States, putting a price on carbon and expecting the marginal costs of abatement
to motivate emissions reductions throughout the economy, and to motivate a
certain amount of clean energy technology innovation.

Alex Trembath: There was also R&D in there. There were also provisions for jobs, but at the
time it was very reflective of the dynamic that you describe: a sort of a shift
away from significant government involvement in the economy, towards
expecting the free market or a sort of light touch price signal from the
government, to rely on market actors to do a lot of the work of decarbonizing
and a lot of the work of innovating.

Alex Trembath: At the time, a group of organizations... obviously I'm biased, but with I think
Breakthrough at the center of that was pretty critical, not just of the legislation
itself, which we were, for all the loopholes and handouts and delays in actual
implementation that were needed to actually get Waxman-Markey even to the
House floor in the first place, but really critical of the whole thing, in that you
were relying on this alleged free market in the energy system to deal with this
public crisis of climate change, when you didn't have actually the technologies
that would be needed to deal with the problem at the time.

Alex Trembath: Again, thinking back 10 years ago, this was before solar got really cheap, before
wind got cheaper, before batteries started to get cheap. It was at the start of
what we thought might turn into a nuclear renaissance in the United States but
ultimately did not. But that was the division at the time, was this very, quote
unquote, "neoliberal consensus" in the environmental community for this cap
and trade carbon pricing program, versus a small minority of voices including
Breakthrough, who were saying, "No actually, we need much better, more
scalable, cheaper clean energy technologies. That should be the focus."

Alex Trembath: I just wonder if you think that that is right, that that framing is right, that the
way I see it, that the political orientation has really shifted. Now you hear much
more often folks on the left who 10 years ago were pushing hard for this
neoliberal agenda, now you hear much more often folks on the left pushing
against that, and saying, "No actually, we don't need market forces. We don't
just need a price signal. We need government action." Do you see that shift as
well?

Jameson McBride: Absolutely. I think it's remarkable in some ways how quickly it happened,
because in 2009 you had the Waxman-Markey plan which in some ways I think
is the opposite of the Green New Deal approach to climate. Waxman-Markey
would have created a market for carbon credits, and this explicit focus on
markets and the belief that markets are both necessary and sufficient to
decarbonization, that was really, really, strongly held by almost everybody in
the environmental community. Of course not everyone... you had some groups
like Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth that criticized Waxman-Markey for
being too conservative in a sense, for being not enough.

Jameson McBride: But then, that was 2009. And then in the next couple of years, in the stimulus
package that was passed under Obama, you had this different model for climate
policy emerging, and that was a model that focused much more on the federal
government's role in the economy, on our ability, in the government's ability to
stimulate innovation, without relying on these artificial markets for carbon
credits. And that resembles, the stimulus resembles the Green New Deal much
more than Waxman-Markey does. And I think the politics are similarly different.
The politics are more like a stimulus. In some sense, the original New Deal was a
stimulus package as well, and so the politics have changed very quickly. They continue to change very quickly.

Jameson McBride: We were talking a little bit before this recording about how very recently the focus of American environmentalists who cared about climate was on things like pipelines and divestment. That is I think completely different from the Green New Deal. It's different in every sense. It's different in scale, in the level of what you care about. You're caring about these individual companies and these individual places as opposed to this broad national action. So the politics continue to evolve really quickly. I think there's obviously a lot of momentum behind the Green New Deal, but who's to say that something else might emerge in the next couple of years that sweeps it away and replaces it and redefines the whole debate again?

Alex Trembath: Yeah, just on one thing you said. I was struck as soon as the Green New Deal became a big topic of conversation, I'm looking at Mike Grunwald's book behind me here in the room, The New New Deal, which was about the stimulus program that the Obama administration passed in 2009, Grunwald's argument there being that the stimulus package, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, was the biggest single piece of legislation, shifting social welfare, investment in technology, education priorities, climate and clean energy agendas, that had existed in decades.

Alex Trembath: And so I had a bit of déjà vu, and I'm sure Mike did, when the Green New Deal showed up. I got, "What we need is a green New Deal." And it was like The Green New Deal sort of happened in 2009 and 2010 and the years in which the Recovery Act was being implemented. Obviously not to the degree that we are now 100% decarbonized or anything like that, but I just think it's funny that the history behind the Green New Deal, whether it's the major shift that we've seen politically since Waxman-Markey, or the template for a Green New Deal that you see in the Recovery Act, I feel like a lot of that doesn't get nearly as much credit as it deserves.

Jameson McBride: Absolutely. I think it's remarkable how little the proponents of the Green New Deal criticize the stimulus. They have a lot of criticisms of Obama: obviously bailing out the banks, and stuff about criminal justice and foreign policy. Very few people criticized the stimulus, especially for what it did for climate. And I think that's remarkable given how willing they are to criticize Obama more broadly. I think the stimulus probably was something like the most significant intervention in the economy by the government in decades. I think that shows maybe how reticent the government has been to intervene in the economy for a few decades. And I think if you look at things like Medicare for all as well as the Green New Deal, they poll very well, so there seems to be an appetite in the American public to have one of these waves of government intervention again.

Alex Trembath: They do poll very well, but I do want to test that a little bit. Just returning to the question of political salience: the Recovery Act was an $800 odd billion stimulus, mostly debt spending and a lot of tax cuts. And it was passed in sort of an
emergency fashion, when the economy was bleeding hundreds of thousands of jobs every month and the banks were failing. And that's simply not the scenario that America is in today. Who knows if we'll face another recession that might activate something else like the Green New Deal in the next two, five, 10 years. Very possible. But I just have that observation about the politics here: you had the Recovery Act, which was very successful in terms of driving down the price of a lot of clean energy technologies. You had Waxman-Markey, which crashed and burned. That was the last big national conversation about energy and climate.

Alex Trembath: And then as you say, I think in reaction to those either quite small successes or failures or whatever, you did have this very concerted climate movement show up. You had 350.org, and a bunch of other new environmental organizations as well the energy and legacy of the Sierra Club, and NRDC, and you had a lot of organization and movement building around things like the Keystone pipeline, around things like divestment, but also about climate justice and a whole bunch of other things. And again, I wonder how that translates today, now that it's a decade later. We have this movement for whatever it's worth. Is that enough to pass something like the Green New Deal in the most ambitious terms that it's described?

Jameson McBride: It's a great question. I think the politics remain extremely uncertain for anything like the Green New Deal or even Medicare for All. Our current political situation is relatively abnormal it seems. And it seems like it might be a while before things return to something like sanity. I think the political goals of the people behind the Green New Deal seem to be that if you don't try to triangulate too much, and if you instead give this broad vision that inspires people, you can convince them without having to sort of pander to them, if that makes sense.

Jameson McBride: It's a relatively unproven thing, but it seems to have worked pretty well with Medicare for All, that you do something really ambitious and lay all your cards on the table and say, "This is the world that we want," that's going to bring people to your cause in a way that's both easier and probably has a little bit more integrity than dishing out favors to people that you want to get on board with. It's hard to tell whether that approach will ever work in Washington. I don't think that I myself am a good judge of what is viable in the horse trading and all of that, but it does make for a very interesting policy conversation to have this really broad vision.

Alex Trembath: No, I share your lack of willingness to predict or opine about what's going to happen. I tell people all the time these days that if you asked me a year ago today, "Is climate change going to be a central focus of the 2020 election, or a priority of what very possibly could be a Democratic administration post 2020?", I would have said, "No, that's crazy. No one cares about climate change."

Alex Trembath: And to my surprise, and largely to my liking, I've seen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and a couple of other people actually put climate change to the front and center, largely, and I want to talk about this, largely by associating it with other
things that people care about: healthcare, jobs, education. I want to ask you what you think about all that, but again, the Green New Deal isn't really a thing. As you say, it's sort of a broad, inspiring vision of some kind of positive future. And I wonder what you think of all the things that come along with that. I think that there's pros and cons to either describing your positive vision for the future in one compelling vision, and sort of putting all your eggs in one legislative basket.

Jameson McBride: Yeah, so that's been one of the most controversial parts about the Green New Deal in policy circles, is that some versions of the Green New Deal include things like Medicare for All, or a job guarantee or even a universal basic income, and it's not clear at all that those things would actually help decarbonize the economy. You could have a completely decarbonized economy where people didn't have healthcare, and people didn't have jobs, and they're different goals.

Jameson McBride: I think the idea behind it is that it's part of this broader vision of a positive and sort of equitable future that we all want, and that it would help bring people on board to a Green New Deal if you started including things like a job guarantee. But in terms of the actual policy and the pragmatic aspect of it, it makes it much more complicated. And it doesn't just make it more complicated, it makes it more expensive. And so you already face this problem of people asking how are you going to pay for it, and if you start adding in billions and billions in existing additional social programs that really don't relate to climate much at all, you make it even harder.

Jameson McBride: I think maybe we've passed the peak usefulness of including social programs in the Green New Deal, because people are already on board now, and maybe now we're at the point it's time to start talking about the climate aspects specifically, and leave the discussions about a job guarantee and a Medicare for All to their own worlds in the political discourse.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, that's my thing, is that ... I'm very open to a lot of the progressive agenda when it comes to not climate change ... 2020 onward, I don't have a lot of expertise or again a lot of predictive capability there, but very eager to see the conversations about Medicare for All, free college, childcare, paid leave, universal basic income. These are all really exciting to me. As you say, really exciting as debates that we're going to have in earnest. And as you say, the original New Deal was a decade long set of bills and administrative measures passed, not just one thing. So you can easily imagine a Democratic administration, 2020 to 2024, maybe 2028, saying, "Everything we're doing is the Green New Deal." You could work on Medicare for All over here, you could work on paid leave over here, you could work on climate change over here. And that seems eminently doable and compatible with the way that even progressives are talking about the Green New Deal today.

Alex Trembath: What I start to get most nervous about is what is the "green" in a Green New Deal, because I think on the one hand that it's being kept very open right now, in a good way. It's 2019; we don't have to actually make huge decisions about
trade-offs or technical goals, at least for another year and a half or two. On the other hand, I do feel like the Green New Deal is often pitched as this vision of a future where everyone in America has healthcare and a job, and that climate change is no longer a problem. And I know the Left's agenda for a couple of those things, sort of in general. Medicare for All, public option, single payer, something like that. I know what that looks like.

Alex Trembath: I know about a jobs guarantee, I know about universal basic income, I know about free college and worker training and things like that. I know what those are. I still don't know what the left and the climate left is really imagining when they say "Green New Deal", when they say, "We're going to deal with climate change," sometimes "Deal with climate change by 2030," in a pretty rapid time frame. What do you think about that?

Jameson McBride: Yeah, it's an open question in some ways, because what they mean isn't no pipelines. What they mean isn't divestment. What they mean is broader climate policies and laws that would require the American economy to decarbonize. So in the current drafts of the Green New Deal legislation, that would look like a requirement that all the electricity in the US become clean, so that you call it a 100% clean energy standard, or 100% renewable portfolio standard by a certain year, sometimes 2030, 2050, something like that. And that you would be trying to incentivize other sectors like transportation and agriculture to decarbonize through things like tax credits and standards and things like this.

Jameson McBride: Those are very different goals than stopping pipelines. They're different in every way from stopping pipelines, and so there's a little bit of whiplash there I think, for climate activists, to say, "One the one hand, we're really concerned about these local environmental justice fights ..." And they are important of course, but they're very different from national climate policy. And so it is very much in progress, and I think even the people who are the most ardent supporters of the Green New Deal are figuring out exactly where they want to draw the battle lines.

Jameson McBride: We saw that especially around the release of this FAQ document that came out with the Green New Deal. It was released by Ocasio-Cortez's office, and it included some language that differed wildly from things that other people had been saying in Congress about the Green New Deal. So for example it said that, "We'd want to wind down all nuclear power plants within 10 years," and it said that we'll never support a carbon tax. And it said all these things that everyone else hadn't said. And it caused a lot of stir, and it very clearly illustrated the divides within the left on climate policy.

Jameson McBride: That document was eventually retracted by AOC's office, and pretty much everyone from Markey to Ocasio-Cortez herself came out and said, "That was not what our vision is for a Green New Deal." But the reality is that there is no one thing that exists out there yet. It's a policy that's still being developed. It'll continue to be developed for at least the next couple of years, and so the possibility that it becomes more like the FAQ or less like the FAQ is still out
there, and I think that's one reason that it's really important for anyone who cares about climate to be engaged in the politics of it right now, is because it is still in progress, and this is the future that we're writing right now.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, obviously I disagree with a bunch of the things in the FAQ, and obviously it was a blunder for AOC staff to release that, as they tacitly admitted by retracting it the same day it was released. But I agree with you that this is a lot of Sturm and Drang for nothing in the longer term. Obviously it's sort of embarrassing that the messaging at the launch of the Green New Deal resolution got a little murky, but these are all very broad visions in terms that we're talking about here. I think it's if anything healthy to include more opinions and voices in the debate as opposed to fewer.


Alex Trembath: One of the things that was... one of the problems with the Waxman-Markey process was that dissent and debate was never a thing. It was a sort of technocratic idea, worked up in the campaign by progressive think tanks, and then just poured into the legislative process without any buy-in from folks who really knew about energy technology, or from the environmental community in a bunch of ways. And I think that's why you see a reaction in the post Waxman-Markey years, in the creation of a climate movement. What again I do still find really interesting is that the... Even after a decade of, "Okay, we gotta get beyond this neoliberal reliance on markets" posture from the environmental community, you still basically have a very vague clean energy climate agenda attached to a much less vague social and economic agenda.

Alex Trembath: I think that's one of the things that your blog post, which we'll include in the show notes to this episode, lays out, that there actually is a pretty robust, very classically progressive vision for decarbonizing or for intervening in energy markets, and in broad terms, it's nationalization. And that's not to say that that's the only option. That's certainly not the only option that I or you or Breakthrough would be happy with, but I do still find it strange that the conversation often stops short of that, that even as the overturn window has shifted so much in the left's favor, we'll see what can actually pass Congress, but I think that the hold of green neoliberalism or of carbon pricing or the legacy agendas of past climate politics, I think that holds still very strong.

Jameson McBride: Right, so the thing that my blog post tried to point out is that other countries, especially in Europe, have built out lots of clean energy, and where we started with the blog post is looking at which countries actually built out the most clean energy over time, like as a rate. Which countries had the fastest decarbonization historically? And almost all of those countries had nationalized and centralized energy systems. And not only that, but they did it with only a couple of technologies generally. They did it with nuclear, and they did it with hydro. What does that mean for the Green New Deal? It doesn't mean that we have to nationalize the American electric system all at once, and just build out nuclear and hydro. We're lucky to have more technological options than they did in the
70s, but we don't seem to be able to deploy them relative to our size as fast as they did back then.

Jameson McBride: Our institutions are very different now, and the political decisions we make about electricity are very different right now. You very correctly pointed out that nobody is advocating for a nationalization, but I think what people could advocate for is more scale, and not just things like rooftop solar and community projects that produce local energy, but big projects that would meaningfully move the needle on decarbonization in the US. That should be an explicit focus of the Green New Deal. Scale should be an explicit focus. This trust of government and of scale has been part of democratic socialism or social democracy for a long time, since at least the Second World War, and I think it should be an important part of the Green New Deal in order to realize its full potential in decarbonizing the economy.

Alex Trembath: This is one of the interesting things about the Green New Deal and decarbonization, not just on the energy technology side, but also on the jobs side. A big contrast to what worked for decarbonization in France and Sweden, which was nationalized energy sectors, and nuclear and hydro. And that is still the fastest decarbonization that any country has ever achieved. It's very different than for instance the solar revolution that is taking place particularly in the United States, Germany, Spain, Italy and a couple of other places. That was actually a much more sort of globalist agenda, where obviously you had market incentives, feed-in tariffs in Germany, investment tax credits in the United States, but then you also had most of the manufacturing, and the manufacturing jobs that come along with that, happening in China.

Jameson McBride: That's true.

Alex Trembath: And so it just gives you a sense that there are actually a couple of ways to, as Breakthrough puts it, make clean energy cheap. One is to just rely on public power, to have the government build a lot of power plants on 80, 100 year government bonds, and it all sort of works out in a wash. Another is to treat energy technologies a lot more like tech, a lot more like IT, where you have, if not Moore's law, you have economies of multiples, you have economies of scale, and you have manufacturing economies where you have modular components like solar panels, like batteries, like electric vehicles, that can deployed not just in the political economy that you're in, if it's a nationalized energy sector, but all over the world.

Alex Trembath: And you can imagine that even with nuclear, maybe less so with hydro probably. But you can imagine that with nuclear, with the next generation technologies that we're talking about. You can imagine a much more liberalized decarbonization agenda with smaller reactors that you can roll off 20, 50, 100 off of a conveyor belt in a year or so, than the reactors that we have today, which are really like giant construction infrastructure projects.
Alex Trembath: It's just interesting, both on the jobs side, and on the political economy side, how different energy technologies can play a role in decarbonization.

Jameson McBride: Yeah, so there is definitely a different vision of decarbonization possible that's all done through decentralization and small scale. The problem is that we haven't seen it happen yet.

Alex Trembath: Right.

Jameson McBride: And so it almost begs the question of the people who really value localism to come up with an alternative, an alternative vision for a Green New Deal that would accomplish the same decarbonization rates with their favored scale. And that's really hard for a lot of reasons. It's hard because you're going to get these sort of federalism problems, where certain localities will really want a lot of clean energy, and certain localities won't, and you'll end up with these really uneven disparities. Problems of global natures like this require global responses, and require a lot of cooperation, and doing that without taking advantage of these sort of big sources of dense energy is going to be really hard. It's going to be even harder than it already is.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, and I think again, a lot of different political economy structures, a lot of different technological mixes will probably take hold in different countries and different places around the world. I doubt very strongly whether hyper-localism will ever be the force that carries the day. On the one hand, you can imagine a solar panel in every roof, an electric vehicle in every garage, but those are almost certainly not going to have been built at a factory a mile away from that garage.

Jameson McBride: Right.

Alex Trembath: One of the things that drives the cost of these technologies down if you're relying on those types of cost curves is global supply chains, global manufacturing, learning, things like that. So again, it's a couple of different ways to make clean energy cheap, but how different communities will react, what the sort of jobs that go along with those entail, those are going to be very live questions as we try and get Americans to care about decarbonization, really en masse for the first time ever.

Jameson McBride: Absolutely, and one thing that'll be hard for the left, and has always been hard for the post-material left, is separating scale from cultural scale or aesthetic scale. So people have this deep cultural distrust of big things, of the government as this Leviathan type entity, and that's something that's baked into American culture as much as anything else is. But at the same time, people on the left revere the social democracies in Europe, and what people need to realize is that those social democracies are enabled by scale, and their decarbonization has been enabled by scale. Either we're going to have to chart a completely new
path, or we're going to have to realize that there are things we can learn from those experiences.

Alex Trembath: Well, with that, I would encourage you all to go read Jameson's recent-ish blog post on the Green New Deal and everything he and I read on this subject from now. Jameson, thanks for sitting down with me.

Jameson McBride: Thanks for having me.

Alex Trembath: Thanks for tuning into Breakthrough Dialogues. If you like our show, tell your friends, rate us on iTunes, and subscribe on whatever platform you get your podcasts. I want to again thank my guest Jameson, and our producers Alyssa Codamon and Tali Perelman. Catch you next time.