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Monk: Inglis an unlikely environmentalist

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis, R-S.C., has news for you:

The era of cheap gasoline is over. SUVs will be things of the past. Gas will cost so much people will give them up.

"The resale value of them is dropping by the day," says Inglis, who represents South Carolina's most conservative area — the Greenville-Spartanburg corridor.

"In several years, \$4 a gallon gasoline will be a fond memory."

Such talk comes from a new Inglis, one who now steers a course apart from many Republican colleagues, who aren't known for aggressive environmental stances.

In recent years, Inglis, 48, has become the most active of the eight-member S.C. congressional delegation on the intertwined issues of energy, the environment and the economy, according to political analysts, and business and environmental sources.

By temperament a maverick, Inglis will tell you what he actually thinks, based on research, instead of spewing a slick party line.

"I used to pooh-pooh global warming," Inglis said in a wide-ranging interview last week.

But his son, Robert Jr., prodded him on climate change.

"He said, 'I'll vote for you, but you have to clean up your act on global warming.'"

Inglis is now far greener than the other five S.C. Republican Congress members, but not as green as the two Democrats — Rep. John Spratt and Rep. Jim Clyburn — according to the League of Conservation Voters.

"Inglis understands true conservatism encompasses conserving energy, land and other natural resources," says Dana Beach, S.C. Coastal Conservation League executive director.

While conservatives will tell you that more drilling in the United States will lower gasoline prices, Inglis says drilling for more oil won't lower gas prices because the country has only 2 percent of the world's oil reserves.

He'll explain that China and India have 1 billion or more people, and both have populations who soon will drive cars, like Americans.

"That means the price of gas will continue to rise," Inglis says, adding evidence indicates the world's oil producers already operate at what is considered "peak capacity" — producing about 87 million barrels a day.

Inglis says people understand best when he frames oil as a national security issue.

"We are funding both sides of the war on terror," he says. "We need to no longer depend for our transportation fuels on a region of the world that is so unstable and has people who use our purchases of oil to finance acts of terrorism against us."

SOUTH POLE VISIT

Inglis' post as top Republican on a key House subcommittee on Energy and Environment has allowed him to research environmental issues.

As a member of the House Science and Technology Committee, he's visited Greenland and the South Pole, and seen scientific evidence of man-made global warming. Evidence indicates it could have catastrophic effects on the world, he says.

And because he is willing to work with Democrats, he has forged relationships that allow him to help craft key energy and environmental laws.

For example, Inglis worked with U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-Ill., last year to pass a law to offer millions in prize money

for fuel-saving technology and to require federal buildings to phase in energy-saving lights.

RANKLING BMW

Inglis' activism might seem not to mesh with his district.

After all, people known most for resisting aggressive measures to tackle energy and environment issues are conservatives, evangelical Christians and business folks — the bedrock of the Greenville-Spartanburg area.

But Danielle Vinson, a political science professor at Greenville's Furman University, says Inglis is not in trouble with his constituents. "He's been very smart about the way he's tackled these issues," Vinson said.

Rick Beltram, Spartanburg County GOP chairman, says, "Bob will do well in the primary."

Beltram says Inglis' "deep thinking" on issues like air pollution can help the urban Upstate, where increasingly dirty air might lead to curbs on growth and jobs.

Inglis takes positions that irk major industries in his district.

His insistence on high-mileage standards rankled major manufacturer BMW. None of its S.C.-made vehicles meet current U.S. fuel efficiency standards.

"They seem to understand at some level what I'm committed to," chuckles Inglis, who praises BMW for using renewable energy sources and getting ready to make fuel-efficient vehicles.

BMW spokesman Bobby Hitt says his company finds Inglis helpful on most issues and versed on energy and environment.

"It's kind of hard not to support a guy who really does his homework," Hitt says.

'MAKE IT HAPPEN'

Inglis likes nuclear, solar and wind initiatives, but his favorite future fuel is pollution-free hydrogen. But scientists say technology to make hydrogen a reality is 20 or 30 years away.

That doesn't bother Inglis, who recalls President Kennedy's 1961 promise to go to the moon.

"When he said it, it was anything but certain," Inglis says. "We didn't get to the moon by waiting for it to come to us, and we won't get to hydrogen by waiting for it to happen. We have to go make it happen."

The government needs to have a similar commitment to renewable alternate fuels, he says.

Pollution worries Inglis. Coal-fired power plants dump pollutants into the air — free of any clean-up charges, he says. That means electricity from coal is far cheaper than it should be, he says.

Inglis says his biggest challenge is convincing people they need more facts when they assert the U.S. can drill its way to energy independence.

At a Sertoma Club meeting last week in Greenville, he recalls, members said, "Inglis, come on man, get us some more oil! Why can't we go drill in Anwar (Alaska National Wildlife Preserve)?"

Inglis says he told the group, "There are no quick solutions."

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