

Leah Stokes (00:00):

On July 14th, 2022, the climate bill that I had worked on for years seemingly died. Senator Joe Manchin, the pivotal 50th vote, had walked away from the negotiation table again. In Washington, my friend Adrian Deveny, a Senate staffer, sat in his home office watching his kids through the glass door and sobbed. He had given a decade of his life to this bill. He barely slept for three days. And out in California, I held my not quite one-year-old twins and cried too. Late that night, another friend, Sonia Aggarwal, called from the White House. She'd been working on this bill for almost 18 months straight. The two of us had been on the phone many days, and she told me that night, "This is just a bump in the road. We are going to win," she said. "But you know, it's a really big bump." I could hear her son in the background mimicking her, yelling, "It's a really big bump," over and over again.

(01:07):

We laughed between our tears. For nearly two weeks, it seemed like the story was over. Reporters wrote the bill's obituary. Pundits explained where we'd gone wrong, and I felt lost. At the time, I didn't know it, but there were closed door meetings happening with Senator Manchin in the Senate basement in total secrecy. Finally, 33 days after the bill was condemned to death, the Inflation Reduction Act was signed into law. It was and remains the largest climate investment in American history. This is the story of how that happened.

(01:58):

This is A Matter of Degrees. I'm Dr. Leah Stokes.

Katharine Wilkinson (02:01):

And I'm Dr. Katharine Wilkinson. And in this episode, we are once again flipping the format. But today, Leah is the one in the hot seat because, drum roll, she wrote a new book.

Leah Stokes (02:13):

That's right. I have a new book out September 1st. It's called The Carbon Wave: A Story of Democracy, Parenthood, and the Race to Protect Our Planet. And the book tells the unlikely story of how the largest climate law in American history passed, the so-called Inflation Reduction Act.

Katharine Wilkinson (02:32):

The book is detailed and personal. It is suspenseful and deeply inspiring. It gives us a front row seat to how policy change unfolds. You can pre-order The Carbon Wave right now at bookshop.org. We'll put a link in the show notes.

Leah Stokes (02:52):

And in this episode, we're going to bring on two of the book's main characters. They are people who gave years of their lives to making this law a reality in both Congress and the White House.

Katharine Wilkinson (03:04):

But first, I'm going to take this opportunity to talk to the author. Leah, what exactly is a carbon wave?

Leah Stokes (03:13):

So as I think pretty much all of our listeners know, the carbon footprint is a really ubiquitous idea, and that's because it was popularized by fossil fuel companies. They spent hundreds of millions of dollars advertising this idea, and the concept is that everybody as an individual is responsible for their carbon pollution. You have to bike or recycle or compost or something like that. And it's a very individualistic

paradigm. So the carbon wave is a concept that is supposed to replace the carbon footprint, and it's the idea that we can join with others in a collective to change the rules of society, to change the structure, the infrastructure of our society. It's that structural work that is actually going to defeat the climate crisis, and that is where we should be focusing our attention. So the carbon wave is kind of like how droplets in the ocean join together to become a really big wave.

(04:13):

That's the same idea, a bunch of people coming together to change really big things in our society. And in this book, I use that metaphor of the carbon wave to tell a story of how thousands of people joined together to pass the largest climate law in American history, which then rippled out heat pumps in homes and electric cars that got them on the road and solar panels all across the country and batteries, right? It had such a big effect to change the structure of society, and that's why we have to focus on big structural changes through carbon waves.

Katharine Wilkinson (04:48):

And of course, as a droplet in the carbon wave that saw this bill come into being, you were a pregnant droplet. You were pregnant with twins during this time and then giving birth. Tell us what that chapter was like for you.

Leah Stokes (05:05):

At the time that I was working on the Inflation Reduction Act, well, it wasn't called that back then. It was called Build Back Better or the Green New Deal or whatever you want to say. At the time I was pregnant with twins. It was super high risk. We didn't know what would happen if the kids would survive or not. Today, happy to tell you, they're five years old, happy and healthy and smart.

Katharine Wilkinson (05:26):

And deeply identical.

Leah Stokes (05:27):

Yes, they're identical twins and they also look like me. But at the time we didn't know what would happen. And so it was really high stakes on the personal front and the work I was doing with this bill in Congress was also very high stakes and we didn't know if it would survive either. So I really braid those stories together and the other main protagonists in the book were also my age, also having kids, and also dealing with sort of the high stakes life and death scenarios that is parenthood and policymaking.

Katharine Wilkinson (05:58):

We learned about a very innovative use of a slightly defunct surgical light as you stage your hospital room with the help of your nurse to go on Democracy Now! That for me is kind of the quintessential moment of these two braided stories, the personal and the professional coming together.

Leah Stokes (06:19):

I was hospitalized late in my pregnancy because I had to be continuously monitored. And at that time there was this huge heat wave hitting the Pacific Northwest and I got asked to go on Democracy Now! at five in the morning and I knew the sun wouldn't be up and I'd be in a hospital room. So I asked a nurse to see if she had a light that I could use to sort of light my makeshift TV studio and she ended up wheeling in a giant surgical lamp that was broken so we weren't misusing hospital equipment, but it had a light that was bright enough to take a baby out of a birth canal. It sort of mimicked the sun. And that was the sort of thing that I was up to, trying to kind of balance the work and my pregnancy and parenthood as the kids

were born, knowing that the most important thing that I could do for these kids was really to protect their home, which is our planet and our climate.

Katharine Wilkinson ([07:09](#)):

And of course this book is about policy. It's about passing the IRA, but it really is a story about people, the people who worked incredibly tirelessly, long hours behind the scenes to build and pass this largest climate bill in American history. And we're very lucky to have two of those amazing humans here with us today.

Leah Stokes ([07:32](#)):

On today's episode, we will be joined by Sonia Aggarwal, who at the time of the story, was the special assistant to the president for climate policy. When she started in the White House, she also had a four-month-old son at home, and so she was kind of balancing motherhood and really high level policy work. Today, she is the CEO at Energy Innovation.

Katharine Wilkinson ([07:57](#)):

Our second guest, Adrian Deveny, was Director of Energy and Environmental Policy for Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. Adrian was the Senator's lead climate negotiator, and now he advises nonprofits and businesses on climate strategy.

Leah Stokes ([08:12](#)):

And the three of us worked really closely on this law, and then I interviewed them a lot to build this book and tell this story.

Katharine Wilkinson ([08:21](#)):

Let's go ahead and bring in Sonia and Adrian to help us tell a little bit of it. You all got into lots of what the late John Lewis would call good trouble together, but before you were the Avengers of climate policy passing this biggest climate bill in history, how did you meet?

Adrian Deveny ([08:45](#)):

I believe when Leah and I first met, we were both interns, summer interns for Resources for the Future, which is a think tank in Washington DC. I can't remember exactly where her office was in that building. I do remember -

Leah Stokes ([09:02](#)):

I was in the holding pen. I didn't have a private office. I wasn't fancy enough.

Adrian Deveny ([09:05](#)):

You were in a holding pen. Yes, that's right. Well, I was in a closet. It was basically a closet that held dusty old books and it was about four feet by four feet, and that was my space. And that was the life of an intern in DC back then. And that's where -

Leah Stokes ([09:24](#)):

We mostly ate a lot of frozen yogurt actually.

Adrian Deveny ([09:26](#)):

Oh yes, that's right. There's a frozen yogurt place at -

Leah Stokes ([09:29](#)):

Mr. Yogato.

Adrian Deveny ([09:29](#)):

Mr. Yogato in DuPont Circle. Right. So that was how the two of us first connected.

Leah Stokes ([09:35](#)):

And hilariously enough, you know how I met Sonia? This podcast, we interviewed her for one of our very first episodes about trying to get to 100% clean power by 2035. And it's so funny to have a recording of when you first meet a person because I think I asked Sonia how did you decide to have a baby? Because she was pregnant at the time. And she told me that she was sort of grappling with the idea and how would it shrink her focus from sort of protecting all life on earth to one being. And it was such a crazy experience because that's how I saw it too. So meeting Sonia was like meeting a sister in that way. There was such a commonality between the way that we saw the world. So magic is how I might put it.

Katharine Wilkinson ([10:24](#)):

Sonia, did you feel the magic when you met these two?

Sonia Aggarwal ([10:28](#)):

Of course I did. How could you not? Look at these individuals. It would be hard to not feel magic. There's a lot of people that one meets in trying to do the work, really smart, passionate, wonderful people that are doing really important work, maybe adjacent to what you're doing. And then there's every once in a while you run into people who you're just like, "Oh, we see the world in a very similar way." And I feel like we can skip over just a ton of this kind of background of what do you think about this and what do you think about that? Because we can just jump right into, okay, here's the issue. And I absolutely felt that way when meeting both Adrian and Leah. I feel grateful to history for letting me find them.

Katharine Wilkinson ([11:12](#)):

And I should say that Sonia and Adrian are not the only characters in this book. There are many, but there was really a fourth important character, right Leah?

Leah Stokes ([11:22](#)):

Yeah. The book also centers on Sam Ricketts, a friend and brilliant advocate who designed many of the policies that eventually ended up in the Inflation Reduction Act. And he was supposed to come today, but literally Sam had a conflict because he had to go meet with a governor's team on climate, which is the more important thing. But that gives us an opportunity to just shout out, metaphorically speaking, the really thousands of other people who were working in Congress, in the White House, outside of government, even journalists telling stories, kids in the street protesting. This law would not have happened without all of those people.

Katharine Wilkinson ([12:04](#)):

So without further ado, question to you, Adrian, first. When Dr. Stokes came to you and said, "I think I want to write a book about this wild journey we've been on," what did you think and how did she get you to say yes?

Adrian Deveny ([12:19](#)):

Oof. Well, the first thing I'll say is that most of my career, I've been hiding from the public, and so my very first reaction was one of anxiety, but I definitely felt like the story needed to be told. This was a really historic event and it deserved to be captured. I mean, it was the biggest climate achievement that our country has ever accomplished. And so I wanted to support her however I could to do that project.

Leah Stokes ([12:52](#)):

But I'll say that Adrian never wanted to really be the main character and spent a lot of time trying to say he wasn't that important and there were other people. And I think he's still doing that today, but he can't stop it anymore because the book is now in print.

Adrian Deveny ([13:07](#)):

I actually don't think I ever told you, Leah, that I wasn't an important character. I actually think I was an important character. It's just that I think there were thousands of important characters. This truly was a group effort that would not have happened without a lot of people advocating in a lot of different ways. So that's a hard story to tell because it's a very complicated story, but it was sort of the essence of the success at the same time.

Katharine Wilkinson ([13:34](#)):

Sonia, did you have a similar misgiving at the outset?

Sonia Aggarwal ([13:39](#)):

So yes, I think is the short answer, but also similar to Adrian, I really love Leah and want to support anything that she does. I think that her capability to tell this story is really important for the world and also beyond even the United States. I think there's a lot of other countries that were looking at this policy process in the US and it can be a little bit mystifying if you're not right there in the center of it.

Katharine Wilkinson ([14:09](#)):

Well, I think it was very generous of you all ultimately to be willing to be so closely profiled because I think people who want to be deeply engaged in action on climate change from different spaces, often the only really visible stories they see or hear are the ones of the climate social media set, which is one very particular archetype in the work. And I think it's so incredibly helpful to have this inside and very personal perspective on what it looks like to be part of collaborative systemic change.

Leah Stokes ([14:50](#)):

And of course, there's also a political story, right? We would think about Joe Biden and Joe Manchin as the protagonists. And I really wanted to show that that is only one level of the way we can tell a story about how policy change happens, that of course there's the capital P politics story and the really big parts about elections and the Senate and the presidency and how these specific often men hold and wield power. But below that, when we actually talk about the details of how policy is made, it involves kids in the street protesting. It involves wonks like Sonia and Adrian writing legislative text and then pushing it through these obscure processes. There is just so many ways that everyday people can get involved in policy change. And although this is a federal story, the same thing could be told at a local level.

([15:51](#)):

You want to get a bike lane in your community or you want your city government to buy electric vehicles for their fleet or you want your state government to create funding to electrify schools. All of these are things that everyday people can and must be involved in, otherwise they literally won't happen. So I

wanted to tell the story in a way that made more relatable everyday people like Sonia and Adrian the heroes, rather than Joe Biden or Nancy Pelosi or someone like that who can just feel less

(16:26):

Reachable for an everyday person.

Katharine Wilkinson (16:29):

Totally. Less reachable and also, as you say, very much not the full story, right? You really get a sense from the book of how much you all were in almost daily contact during this couple of intense years. But Leah, I'm curious, when you were interviewing Sonia and Adrian, did you actually learn things that you didn't know were going on at the time as well?

Leah Stokes (16:55):

Oh, hugely. I mean, the person I was the most in daily contact with during this period was Sam Ricketts. One thing I learned interviewing different people for this book is different people have different kinds of memory. So Sam has much more episodic memory, meaning that he remembers where he was and what happened, and he can tell a story that's physically embodied in a place versus Adrian and Sonia are the classic wonks. They can really remember facts and ideas and details. Adrian could be like, "I expected the CBO report to have \$11 billion for Superfund, but where were you when that occurred?" He's like, "I don't know. Why are you asking me this question?" So when trying to make the story narrative so that a normal human would want to read it, not just facts and policy wonky stuff-

Adrian Deveny (17:44):

I was a real dud when it came to that.

Leah Stokes (17:47):

There were people who were better at the storytelling.

Sonia Aggarwal (17:52):

Actually, when Leah was telling me we were going to talk about the book and sort of looking backward, I was like, "Oh no, I have to read your book in order to remember what happened in my own life."

Katharine Wilkinson (18:06):

In many ways, this is a book that is an explanation of how climate policy comes about. And one of the beautiful things about these different stories that you bring together in the book, Leah, is that we get to hear what that process looks like from these very different perches within the system. So Adrian, you're working in the Senate. Sonia, you're working in the White House. Leah, you were outside of government entirely as a professor at a university, but also kind of activist at large. And so let's unpack a little bit about those perches, if you will. Adrian, maybe we'll start with you. Tell us a little bit about what policy change actually looks like in Congress, and in this case, trying to squeak together a package that all 50 Democratic senators could and would vote for.

Adrian Deveny (19:03):

One thing that you very quickly learn as a congressional staffer is roughly 98% of the time you work on stuff that goes nowhere, but it's the 2% of stuff that goes somewhere that has such an outside impact that it makes it all worthwhile. So I was hired in 2019. The election in 2020 went the Democrats way with the control of both Chambers of Congress and the presidency. And so all of the work that I and others in Congress had been doing to prepare for that moment, we finally had a chance to execute on our plans.

Katharine Wilkinson ([19:36](#)):

Yeah. Sonia, let's go to your perch, not too terribly far away physically from Adrian. What was it like in the White House and particularly the collaboration between the White House and Congress on this?

Sonia Aggarwal ([19:49](#)):

I guess I would say that White House job was the first time I ever worked in government. So it was really a big learning curve for me coming in. And the other piece was that with any new administration, I think something that people maybe don't know from the outside is that it has a very startup vibe at the beginning. There's a lot of hopes and dreams and people coming in with campaign trail ideas and their own ideas and a lot of hope for the impact that they can have. I sort of quickly learned that if I didn't have my own set of clear priorities of what I wanted to accomplish with my time there, that I could easily be pulled in a million different directions.

Katharine Wilkinson ([20:32](#)):

You really get a feeling, I think, for just how much there's this need to be reading and sensing momentum, openings, and as you said, Adrian, to be ready to pounce when there is one. And of course, Leah, you and Sam Ricketts are on the outside of this system, having hooked up lots of ideas that you're going to try to move through it somehow. What was it like to be doing that pushing from the outside?

Leah Stokes ([21:02](#)):

One thing I learned from writing my first academic book where I just kind of studied the policy process is that networks are really important to creating policy change. So if you're just a person like an academic, you're just hanging out by yourself, maybe writing some papers, going through the peer review process, your ability to create change is way, way less than if you join with a lot of other people, people working in nonprofits and think tanks and environmental justice groups and activist groups. If you work together, you can make such a bigger impact. I also talk a lot about the media work that I was doing because I think having coverage on climate change is really essential to creating the policy window that Adrian talked about, having outside pressure from everyday people in public opinion polls saying they care about climate change, letters to the editor, op-eds, TV coverage, radio coverage, all of these things really create the space for Congress to act.

([22:00](#)):

So I don't think you can tell this story, for example, without the Sunrise Movement and the sit-in that Varshini Prakash led with Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in Nancy Pelosi's office in the fall of 2018. That was this huge media and activism catalyst, and the Sunrise kids did that intentionally. They spent a lot of time reading the social movements literature and understanding how the civil rights movement in particular created these big moments that became iconic and that had outside impact.

Katharine Wilkinson ([22:34](#)):

You get the sense through the course of the book about how these different elements of the change process ultimately are gaining collective momentum towards an outcome that everyone is working for and probably has a slightly different vision of what success would be, and almost nobody gets their vision. So it's also, I think, about growing our capacity to understand that progress is always fraught, right?

Sonia Aggarwal ([23:05](#)):

And just to riff on this for one more second, I think we've really lost each other in this country in a lot of ways right now, and there is a way for us to find each other again, because I think that there is so much commonality about what Americans want right now, which is really an ease on the cost of living, really

being able to breathe easier in their communities. There's so much that we can agree on, and it's really about finding the language to be able to talk to one another about it in a way that really works for everybody, and also just building trust with people that you might disagree with on certain issues and finding those that you do agree with. So I guess just to say that trust component and just showing up with integrity, even if you intellectually disagree with someone, makes such an enormous difference for being able to get things done.

Katharine Wilkinson ([23:58](#)):

I think it's really beautifully said. Sonia, I can hear you wanting to take us to the future, so let's go there. So needless to say, the Inflation Reduction Act comes to pass, and then of course we end up losing the White House. And in the Trump presidency, we've seen lots of efforts to undo the very important and the very needed climate policy that you all pushed forward in the Biden years. The conventional wisdom is that the IRA was erased and all of the progress has been out the window, but Leah, your book ends in a more hopeful place than that conventional narrative. So talk to us, Dr. Stokes, about the epilogue and the case that you make that the IRA lives on.

Leah Stokes ([24:51](#)):

Yeah, I also wrote this up recently in my new Substack. It's called Notes from the Electric Era, as well as in an article on the Atlantic. It's a piece about how Bidenomics worked better than most people think. So you can check out either of those pieces as well. You can go to electricnotes.news to find them, but it's just not true to say that the IRA is dead or that it didn't work. I don't believe that empirically. Why do I say that? Well, so in the political science literature, we have this idea of policy feedback, the idea that a policy itself can reshape politics. And so a lot of, for example, the manufacturing investments went to Republican districts. This was covered a lot in the media, places like the Clean Economy Tracker showed empirically where that all was. You can go online and check it out.

([25:44](#)):

And during the negotiation process for the One Big Beautiful Bill Act in the House and the Senate, this big Republican bill, a bunch of those Republicans with projects in their district, and they showed up and they said, "Hey, how about you don't totally kill everything?" And so yes, a lot of tax credits went away, particularly for everyday people. So the one to get an EV or a heat pump or solar panels, they did get phased out at the end of last year. But the corporate tax credits did not. And that was probably because the corporations were more organized politically and they were benefiting from these investments and they said, "Don't take them away." And I think people don't understand how big this policy was. Between the passage of that law and this year, there are more than 500 factories across the country and nine in 10 of them are still moving forward.

([26:39](#)):

So people have, I think, in the back of their head that it didn't do that much and that it's all gone. I'm sorry, nine in 10 factories still being built for solar panels, batteries, components, critical minerals, creating hundreds of thousands of jobs in 234 districts across the country. I mean, it's \$185 billion of private investment. I think people have trouble wrapping their head around just how transformative that is still and is going to continue to be.

Katharine Wilkinson ([27:12](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I think the core invitation you make in the book, Leah, is for all of us to join the carbon wave. And the thing about waves is that they undulate, and it's fair to say, I think, that we are in a trough for the movement writ large and certainly for US climate policy.

Leah Stokes ([27:30](#)):

But a lot of the worst attacks are actually coming from different angles. They aren't really related to the Inflation Reduction Act and Energy Innovation, which Sonia runs, has done the best work on this, but there are things like keeping coal plants open, even though they're expensive and dirty or rolling back mercury regulations. There are other ways that they have been attacking environmental policy writ large that actually don't have much to do with the Inflation Reduction Act. So if we're going to tell a story about was this policy successful at reshaping the politics, did it stick around? My answer is yes. Yes, it was. Now, does that mean we're living in the golden days of environmental and climate policy in America? No, absolutely not. Trump is president, but a lot of his damage is actually coming through other ways. And I think that's important to understand because otherwise we can take the wrong lesson, which is that, oh, we spent all this energy to pass this big bill through Congress and it didn't work, so next time we shouldn't even try.

(28:27):

I think that's wrong. I think that it did work and that next time we should do it even better. And like Sonia was saying, we should make sure that it delivers benefits quickly for everyday people to help them reduce the cost of energy, for example. Let's make sure that we get the dollars at the door faster.

Katharine Wilkinson (28:45):

But Sonia, we know you're looking to the future. Where are we headed and where are you now seeing possibility for the years ahead?

Sonia Aggarwal (28:54):

Well, first of all, I guess I would just say the momentum in the clean electricity space is really, really strong as well. We will build more clean electricity generation this year than ever before in this country. Over 90% of all of the power generation that we will add this year will be clean energy, not fossil fuels. So there is an enormous amount of momentum, and that is due in large part to the fact that clean energy has become so inexpensive compared to the alternatives. One thing I saw that just happened in India actually was they did a auction for solar plus batteries and they expected that that would cost a lot more than just building a coal power plant, but that was not the case. The auction results came in just last week and it is 20% cheaper to build this solar plus storage coal equivalent generation than to build a new coal plant in India.

(29:57):

That is an enormous moment. And solar and batteries just keep coming down in price. So we need to move faster so that we can actually build this stuff in this country again at scale, pick up the pace on what we're already building so that we can meet all this rising demand, but also cut people's bills more quickly. The theory is strong, the numbers bear it out, and the moment is again going to arise here for us to make progress.

Katharine Wilkinson (30:28):

Beautiful. Adrian, when the moment comes, what are we going to do with it?

Adrian Deveny (30:34):

Well, I will say first, one of the quirky parts about the Inflation Reduction Act was the name itself doesn't seem to match what we did. If there's one thing that I think we did really well in the Inflation Reduction Act was this industrial policy that builds domestic manufacturing base and good jobs, because that is both substantively good and it builds the political economy for change in the future on climate change when you have such powerful domestic industries that can advocate for their own industry. So I think that's the part we did really well. The part that we were weak on, ironically, was the inflation reduction part. It was

the part that was actually addressing consumers' cost of living. To me, affordability was... We touched on it, of course, in the Inflation Reduction Act with consumer incentives for all kinds of things, heat pumps and electric vehicles and the like, but we need to really focus on consumer affordability and relieving that pain quickly in any future bill.

(31:37):

I think there's a lot of good ideas that people are working on that really make climate solutions also a solution to the affordability crisis.

Katharine Wilkinson (31:48):

When I think about the big takeaway from this book, I think it is that these slightly amorphous ideas of systems change, policy change, democratic change, it all hinges on people. And we see a handful of stories in depth, but as you all have said, thousands of people who were rolling up their sleeves and digging in again and again to see this bill through to reality. For someone that's listening who wants to help, the next time we have a big policy opening, the next time a big climate bill can happen, where do they start and how do they find their footholds in the process?

Leah Stokes (32:30):

My advice is join a group. Bill McKibben always says this, "Be a little less of an individual." So where are you in your life and how can you join with others to create change, whether it's at the local level, the state level or the federal level? That's what the carbon wave idea is. Don't think of yourself as one person by yourself atomized and alone. Think of yourself as a part of a collective, part of a web, part of a network, and that is how you can make change. So the first step is you got to find other people.

Adrian Deveny (33:03):

For young people in particular, I think that there's this sense of, oh, what do I have to offer? Because maybe my resume is not as deep as someone who's been doing this for 20 years, but people want to form community with people like them. And so I think there's a real opportunity right now in particular for young people to just organize themselves more and create new organizations with a new kind of energy that is, I think in this moment, sorely needed. And there's a lot of moments in history of the climate movement and other movements where that's exactly the spark that really led to big change. And it was young people who just decided to organize themselves. So I really encourage young people to think creatively about how to organize with each other.

Sonia Aggarwal (33:46):

Because just as you said, Katharine, it really does come down to people. It comes down to trust and it comes down to this kind of energy of really seeing something that you want to have changed in the world and then banding together with your friends, figuring out who's in charge and then making sure that they've heard your voice. It's so many opportunities at different levels. It doesn't have to be a giant bill in the United States Congress. It can also be so many other really important decisions that are being made sometimes in obscurity by people who really are public servants and care about doing something that's going to make people's lives better in their community, but they never hear from any of those people, so they have no idea what those people actually want. So be one of the people that they hear from.

Katharine Wilkinson (34:31):

I think this piece about orienting to who can I do this work with? Who do I want to do this work with? Because that's often the near term goodness that keeps us going as we go on these winding journeys of change. But also I have to say for all of you, the power of nerddom. And I say that in the most generous sense, you are all students of change. You are all students of solutions. You are students of systems

through which change can happen. And if we aren't willing to do some of that learning, we can have great ideas, but they will remain just that kind of an idea on the shelf.

Leah Stokes ([35:17](#)):

Yeah. I love to say the spreadsheet is mightier than the sword.

Katharine Wilkinson ([35:21](#)):

It's a line in the book.

Leah Stokes ([35:22](#)):

I don't know why that hasn't caught on. It's just so catchy.

Sonia Aggarwal ([35:29](#)):

So relatable.

Katharine Wilkinson ([35:29](#)):

I just had such a visual of you in your spreadsheet, like policy idea number one.

Leah Stokes ([35:36](#)):

All right, friends. Well, you're the best. I'm excited for this book to be out in the world. People are going to read this book and fall in love with you and think you're the best humans and be fangirls or boys of you.

Katharine Wilkinson ([35:49](#)):

As an early reader, I can confirm.

Leah Stokes ([35:51](#)):

Right? It's totally going to happen. So get excited.

Sonia Aggarwal ([35:55](#)):

Thank you guys.

Leah Stokes ([35:57](#)):

Both of you are going to hate that. That's what's so funny about it.

Adrian Deveny ([36:01](#)):

But thank you for putting all the work into it. I mean, it was really your blood, sweat, and tears that -

Sonia Aggarwal ([36:06](#)):

And time.

Adrian Deveny ([36:07](#)):

Deserves all the credit.

Leah Stokes ([36:08](#)):

Yeah, but it wouldn't have been a story to write about if you hadn't put all that effort in either, right? So there you go.

Katharine Wilkinson ([36:13](#)):

Thanks for this, y'all.

Leah Stokes ([36:17](#)):

Well, that was a lot of fun, Katharine. I really enjoyed that opportunity to have you interview me and Sonia and Adrian about the book. It was such a unique and fun experience.

Katharine Wilkinson ([36:27](#)):

Yeah, it was wonderful to have them on and in conversation with you, Leah, and to get a sense of the relationships that you all built, not just the work that you did together.

Leah Stokes ([36:38](#)):

I probably did north of 80 hours of interviews. It's hard to keep track with maybe close to 25, 30 people to piece together this story in a way that had never really been told before. I also used C - SPAN and emails and text messages and videos. Sometimes people took videos or Zoom recordings or all kinds of secondary sources, as we might say, to make it feel like you were in the room with these people and really make it feel like a story, like you're reading a novel almost, except everything is true.

Katharine Wilkinson ([37:14](#)):

And of course, if you're eager to hear more of this story, the book is *The Carbon Wave: A Story of Democracy, Parenthood, and the Race to Protect Our Planet*. It's out September 1st, and if you're going to be in New York for Climate Week, come see us.

Leah Stokes ([37:32](#)):

On Monday, September 21st from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM Eastern in New York City, Katharine and I are really excited to be doing a live conversation about our two new books, *The Carbon Wave* and Katharine's *Climate Wayfinding*. You can hear more about that book on our last episode. This event is free and open to everyone, but seats are limited, so RSVP to snag yours. Details are in the show notes. And more generally, I am going on book tour for *The Carbon Wave* and I would love to see listeners of our show at these events. I'll be on the East Coast, in Boston, New York, in DC, on the West Coast, in Seattle and San Francisco, and then in Canada, in Toronto and Vancouver. And you can find all the details at thecarbonwave.com/tour or just check out our show notes. I would love to see so many of our listeners at these events, so I hope you'll join us.

Katharine Wilkinson ([38:24](#)):

And one more hardy nudge to head over to bookshop.org and order a copy of *The Carbon Wave*. We're going to leave you with the beginning of the book. Here's Leah reading the opening pages.

Leah Stokes ([38:39](#)):

The first time my newborn's eyes saw the sky, it was a dull gray. The first time her lungs breathed outdoor air, it was filled with smoke. On the morning she came home from the hospital, a wildfire burned just miles up the coast from Santa Barbara. It was October 14th, 2021, the day before her due date and 75 long nights after her birth. She'd spent that time inside a NICU incubator, but that evening, my baby slept in her bassinet for the first time, reunited with her twin sister who'd come home a few weeks earlier. The

next morning, our family woke up under one roof. I'd anticipated this day for the past nine months. To mark the occasion, we were going to sing, eat chocolate cake and celebrate. The twins were not all I'd been growing over that long year. I was having a strange high risk pregnancy, gestating policy ideas and babies.

[\(39:34\)](#):

During this time, I worked with a team of fellow dreamers to develop an ambitious plan to rapidly grow clean electricity and slash fossil fuels. What began as a seed, a line and a platform for a presidential candidate grew into a policy paper, then a network of advocates, and finally a bill introduced in Congress. Along the way, we'd even managed to get President Joe Biden to commit to our plan. Now it was part of a climate package, the biggest in history, slowly winding its way through Congress. Both the pregnancy and the policy proved precarious. There were weeks when it looked like my future children might die and the policy seemed destined to pass and other weeks when I was sure the babies would live and the policy would crumble. I desperately wanted everything to work out, but often that felt impossible. That jarring feeling hit me again on October 15th, 2021, my due date.

[\(40:31\)](#):

Just as we were about to sit down for our first dinner as a family, I checked my email. When I saw a message from Coral Davenport, my heart sank. As one of the longest serving climate journalists for the New York Times, Coral was often the first to get the scoop. She wanted to talk as soon as possible. I immediately knew why.

[\(40:53\)](#):

10 days earlier, as my second baby was growing healthy enough to finally come home, I began to hear that the clean energy policy I'd poured so much into was dying. Rumors of its demise grew daily. On one of our last nights at the hospital, my friend Sonia Aggarwal, who worked at the White House, called. It was dinnertime and I needed to drive to the hospital before visiting hours ended, but I also knew I needed to pick up the phone. As one of my closest friends and allies in this work, Sonia said she wanted to be the one to tell me that the policy's prognosis was not good. She would keep pushing and so should I, but the case increasingly seemed terminal. Senator Joe Manchin from West Virginia had hardened against the idea. He held the pivotal 50th vote in the Senate and could veto anything he opposed.

[\(41:41\)](#):

A man who'd made a fortune in coal could not support a rapid transition away from dirty fossil fuels. That night, surrounded by the incessant beeping and alarms of the NICU, I held my tiny daughter and wept. One week later, with both of my children now home, I picked up the phone and Coral's voice came over the line. "I've got the story. I know the policy is dead." Once published, those words would be true. She wanted a quote to explain why this mattered in simple terms, but I couldn't find the words. "Can I call you back in five minutes?" Was all I could manage. The larger climate package was still on the table, but the clean electricity plan, the heart of the bill, was on the chopping block. Its loss would blow a giant hole through the bill. Without it, I feared we wouldn't be able to cut pollution fast enough.

[\(42:33\)](#):

My first instinct was despair, but despair is contagious. Plus there were so many other policies left in the package, policies worth saving. With just a small window of time, I reached out to three colleagues I'd worked with over the past nine months. Each one held a different view, leaving me feeling like I was running through the stages of grief in rapid succession. One person was stuck in denial. It's not dead yet. Do not confirm it. Keep pushing. Another wanted to bargain. Maybe we can still fix this. There must be something else we can do. The third counseled acceptance. It's gone. We need to move on and focus on everything we can still save. I knew my friend Adrian Deveny, who was leading the Senate negotiations for majority leader Chuck Schumer, wanted me to move on too. He had been saying for weeks that we were likely to lose this policy.

(43:30):

With these conflicting voices in my head, I tried to compose a brief comment. Coral had the story right. She'd heard it from multiple sources. There was no point in denying or trying to change the facts. I also knew the loss was too big to accept quietly. Instead, I would try to communicate the gravity of the situation while leaving space for hope. I wrote down word for word what I intended to say and practiced it aloud to my husband who was sitting on our bed watching. When I called Coral back, I did my best to stick to my lines, but I found myself saying more than I meant to. Emotion came spilling out as my voice trailed off. It's pretty sad. It's so sad. My husband, noticing I'd gone off script, signaled that I needed to stop talking. When I hung up, I reassured him, "Oh, that part about me being sad, don't worry.

(44:25):

She won't use that." That night, we still sat down for dinner. We still sang. We still ate cake. I did my best to hold the grief and the joy simultaneously. I'd found myself in the middle of my life, in the middle of a policy fight, in the middle of the climate crisis. In my brief 35 years, polluters had pumped out more than half of all carbon emissions in human history. Even on that happy day, the crisis was still there, casting a shadow. It had already made the air to smoke-filled to take my newborns outside. The next morning, I walked to the corner store to pick up a copy of the New York Times and found the article on the front page above the fold. Crucial element of climate plan likely to be cut, Manchin Block's effort. It opened with a sober reading of the facts.

(45:15):

The most powerful part of President Biden's climate agenda, a program to rapidly replace the nation's coal and gas-fired power plants with wind, solar, and nuclear energy will likely be dropped from the massive budget bill pending in Congress, according to congressional staffers and lobbyists familiar with the matter.

(45:34):

Manchin staff all but confirmed it, the White House wouldn't comment, and then halfway down the page were my words. This is absolutely the most important climate policy in the package. We fundamentally need it to meet our climate goals. That's just the reality, and now we can't, so this is pretty sad. They say you should choose your words carefully, that you shouldn't say something you wouldn't want to read on the cover of a newspaper because words can have consequences you can't predict. In the coming days, young people would begin a hunger strike outside the White House. Staffers would find new ways to cut pollution and pressure would grow on Congress to act, but that was all in the future. That Saturday, all I felt was the overwhelming feeling that I had failed, failed the world, and perhaps most acutely failed my children.

(46:29):

A Matter of Degrees is co-hosted by me, Dr. Leah Stokes.

Katharine Wilkinson (46:33):

And me, Dr. Katharine Wilkinson. We are a production made in partnership with The 2035 Initiative at UC Santa Barbara and the All We Can Save Project.

Leah Stokes (46:41):

Thanks to our funders and supporters who make this show possible, including the Anton Vonk Chair in Environmental Politics and the 11th Hour Project. If you'd like to help us make more episodes, please reach out.

Katharine Wilkinson (46:54):

This transcript was exported on Aug 27, 2026 - view latest version [here](#).

And if you're digging the show, hop on Apple Podcasts or Spotify and give us a five-star rating or leave us a review.

Leah Stokes ([46:59](#)):

Script writing, fact checking, communication, research and production support are by Lucas Boyd and Christin Palmstrom.

Katharine Wilkinson ([47:07](#)):

Sameer Sengupta is our editor and sound designer. Rose Wong designed our show art. Sean Marquand composed our theme song. Additional music came from Blue Dot Sessions and Epidemic Sound.

Leah Stokes ([47:18](#)):

You can find us online at degreespod.com and on YouTube.

Katharine Wilkinson ([47:24](#)):

Stay tuned for more stories for The Climate Curious.