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Senator Whitehouse speaks out about climate change

May 28, 2013 | Author: Summer Allen, Graduate and Postdoc, Brown University



In May, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-Rhode Island) took to the Senate floor to speak out about the devastating effects of climate change. He happened to give his speech at the same moment that a vast tornado hammered Oklahoma, destroying towns and killing 24 people.

Whitehouse's strongly worded remarks included the following:

"So you may have a question for me: why do you care? Why do you, Sheldon Whitehouse, Democrat of Rhode Island, care if we Republicans run off the climate cliff like a bunch of proverbial lemmings, and disgrace ourselves?"

I'll tell you why. We're stuck in this together. When cyclones tear up Oklahoma, and hurricanes swamp Alabama, and wildfires scorch Texas, you come to us, for billions of dollars to recover.

And the damage your polluters and deniers are doing doesn't just hit Oklahoma and Alabama and Texas; it hits Rhode Island with floods and storms, and Oregon with acidified seas, and Montana with dying forests. So like it or not, we're in this together."

Whitehouse was later lambasted for the timing of his remarks—you may have noticed the part that said "when cyclones tear up Oklahoma"—but, [according to a spokesperson](#), the timing of the remarks was purely coincidental; the speech was written before the tornados hit Oklahoma. In fact, Whitehouse addresses the Senate chamber on climate change every single [week](#)—even when he ends up [speaking to an empty room](#). He's made 33 of these speeches thus far.

As a scientist and a Rhode Islander, I'm embarrassed to say that I didn't know that Whitehouse gave these weekly speeches before the controversy this week. It's unfortunate that people were led to believe that Whitehouse was trying to take advantage of a natural disaster for political gain when he has long championed the science of climate change. Whitehouse is a founder and co-chair of both the bipartisan [Senate Oceans Caucus](#) and the [Bicameral Task Force on Climate Change](#) (the former may be especially close to Whitehouse's heart as his wife is an ocean advocate with a Ph.D. in biological oceanography).

While the tragedy in Oklahoma plainly shouldn't be used for political gain, it is an important reminder that several scientists have predicted that climate change will continue to amplify the [frequency](#) and [severity](#) of extreme weather events. I, for one, am glad that Whitehouse continues to raise the alarm about these issues and hope other legislators follow his path.

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