

tank. If we go back to, let's say, February 2019, well before the pandemic—we will just compare February to February. Before that time period, it was \$2.39 a gallon. Today, the average price is \$3.47 a gallon.

What are we experiencing? Policy pressure on limiting access. And what is happening right now is that Sarah Bloom Raskin has been nominated to step into the Federal Reserve, and her primary issue is: Make it even harder.

When our gasoline prices have gone up almost 50 percent in the last year, I would have to say this administration is intentionally finding ways to be able to make the price of energy more expensive, to be able to push people to other energy resources. Who feels the pain of that? Every single American.

I wish I could just say this was hyperbole, but let me read just a few things to you.

During the COVID pandemic, the Federal Reserve was stepping in and trying to stabilize companies around the country that were struggling and that were challenged. And we all know plenty of companies that were struggling or challenged.

One of the things the Federal Reserve did, like they did for every other company, was also to stabilize oil and gas companies, because if those oil and gas companies tanked, that means we have got to get energy from overseas in the days ahead. So they did what they did to every other entity. They were neutral in it and said: If you are a company that is providing an infrastructure, we are going to provide you access to resources the same as everyone else—except Sarah Bloom Raskin wrote this: The Federal Reserve “buying troubled assets from the fossil fuel industry” is “dangerous.”

She said: “It's bad for the economy, bad for the environment, bad for all of us.”

If Sarah Bloom Raskin was in the Federal Reserve during the COVID pandemic, we would have likely seen multiple energy companies across the United States collapse for lack of capital, and, right now, we would be buying even more gasoline and even more oil or natural gas from Russia instead.

I am not sure how that solves the problem, but her priority is this simple statement she has made: “Financial regulators must reimagine their own role so they can play their part in the broader, reimagining of our economy.”

Now, I don't know how many people who I would run into in Oklahoma who would say: Do you know who I want reimagining our economy? Not the free market but someone in DC—I would be interested in them at their office, working with the capital assets across the country and managing who gets access to capital and who doesn't. I would like to have someone I have never met, in DC, reimagining our economy based on their preferences.

I don't meet many people like that in Oklahoma. They want a fair playing field, they want a level playing field, and they want free markets.

Do we want a clean economy? Absolutely, we do.

I would challenge anyone in this Chamber to look at the energy breakdown in Oklahoma and compare it to your State's energy breakdown, in the amount of renewables that we use in our State versus what you are using in yours.

We are passionate about a clean-energy future, but we are also realists in the process and not trying to drive the price up for every person in the process.

Maria Robinson has also been nominated to be Assistant Secretary of the Office of Electricity. I met with her earlier this week. Ms. Robinson is from Massachusetts. She has vocally opposed natural gas pipelines coming into New England. She was pretty clear that she understands they use dirtier home heating oil in the Northeast, but she doesn't want natural gas pipelines coming in. But she didn't seem to oppose when a Russian tanker pulled in and offloaded natural gas into Boston Harbor. So, literally, buying natural gas from the Russians, not from the United States, didn't seem to be an issue. But she did make this statement: “I would certainly be a part of [the] group of folks who oppose any new gas pipelines.”

In my conversation with her, I asked her about—I just picked a day. January 16, 2022, is the day picked just in our conversation. I said: That particular day in New England, 24 percent of the energy generation was from fuel oil. Over 30 percent was from natural gas. And 8 percent was from renewables—8. That particular day, 24 percent was from home heating oil, over 30 percent natural gas, and 8 percent from renewables.

So my simple question was this: What are you planning to substitute in that? How is this going to work?

Her response was, well, in our area in New England, we are working on connecting our grid more to other parts of the country to deliver electricity to us.

What that really means: We don't like windmills. We don't like to look at them in Boston Harbor. We don't like offshore wind. We want windmills built in Oklahoma, and you guys just ship us our electricity so we can flick on the light.

Ms. Laura Daniels Davis. She has been nominated to be Assistant Secretary for the Office of Land and Minerals Management. She is currently in her role already with DOI. In her role in DOI, she has already made the change that routine permitting decisions that are typically made in the field to expedite the process of making permits, those have all been pulled up to her desk in Washington, DC, where they have slowed down dramatically.

The clear signal was this: If you want to do any oil and gas development, it has to come through me, and it is not going to be rapid like it used to be. So if you are going to invest capital, just understand your capital is whether I make that decision or not.

They have not held a single onshore oil and gas lease sale, even though they are required by law to do so. They just ignored it for a year and said: We are studying it.

There is also a 5-year leasing plan that is required for offshore oil and gas development. So while they have cut off onshore, offshore there is a 5-year lease plan that has to be put in place that is due by June of this year. So far, we have no signal they have even begun that, and it takes months to be able to develop it.

Why are these individuals being selected for these positions? Because it is very clear they have certain priorities in place. They were selected because they are going to block out anything that deals with oil and gas, and their focus is to cut it off right now—cut off pipelines, cut off new leasing, cut off offshore leasing, make it harder to be able to get access to capital. All of that will raise prices for American consumers.

Today—today—it was announced that the inflation rate in the United States is now at 7½ percent. It continues to rise month after month after month. I would say to you: That is directly connected to a group of policies that have been put in place to make energy more expensive—and it is—to make it more difficult to be able to do a lot of things in permitting and such—and it is.

Yes, we are recovering from COVID. I am very aware. But the policies that are put in place are also driving this.

We have 2 million people that have illegally crossed the border last year—2 million. That is an enormous number. That 2-million number did not happen by just the calendar and by COVID. Policies were put in place that have led to a flood of people illegally crossing our border. Policies are being put in place by individuals who are directly leading to 7½ percent inflation in our country.

Can I say to you this? Half of Americans alive have never in their lifetime experienced inflation like they are experiencing right now? Half of the Americans alive do not know what 7½ percent inflation is going to mean to them personally, but they are learning quickly because what they thought they were going to buy last month, they can no longer afford this month. And it doesn't look better next month. And if we don't deal with real consequences for people, including who is put into different positions, this never gets better.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

Ms. CANTWELL. Mr. President, I ask that the scheduled vote occur immediately.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

VOTE ON VEKICH NOMINATION

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Vekich nomination?

Ms. CANTWELL. Mr. President, I ask for the yeas and nays.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there a sufficient second?

There appears to be a sufficient second.

The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk called the roll.

Mr. DURBIN. I announce that the Senator from New Mexico (Mr. LUJÁN) and the Senator from Vermont (Mr. SANDERS) are necessarily absent.

Mr. THUNE. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Wyoming (Mr. BARRASSO), the Senator from Missouri (Mr. BLUNT), the Senator from North Carolina (Mr. BURR), and the Senator from Tennessee (Mr. HAGERTY).

The result was announced—yeas 51, nays 43, as follows:

[Rollcall Vote No. 53 Ex.]

YEAS—51

Baldwin	Heinrich	Peters
Bennet	Hickenlooper	Reed
Blumenthal	Hirono	Rosen
Booker	Kaine	Schatz
Brown	Kelly	Schumer
Cantwell	King	Shaheen
Cardin	Klobuchar	Sinema
Carper	Leahy	Smith
Casey	Manchin	Stabenow
Collins	Markey	Sullivan
Coons	Menendez	Tester
Cortez Masto	Merkley	Van Hollen
Duckworth	Murkowski	Warner
Durbin	Murphy	Warnock
Feinstein	Murray	Warren
Gillibrand	Ossoff	Whitehouse
Hassan	Padilla	Wyden

NAYS—43

Blackburn	Hawley	Romney
Boozman	Hoeben	Rounds
Braun	Hyde-Smith	Rubio
Capito	Inhofe	Sasse
Cassidy	Johnson	Scott (FL)
Cornyn	Kennedy	Scott (SC)
Cotton	Lankford	Shelby
Cramer	Lee	Thune
Crapo	Lummis	Tillis
Cruz	Marshall	Toomey
Daines	McConnell	Tuberville
Ernst	Moran	Wicker
Fischer	Paul	Young
Graham	Portman	
Grassley	Risch	

NOT VOTING—6

Barrasso	Burr	Luján
Blunt	Hagerty	Sanders

The nomination was confirmed.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. VAN HOLLEN). Under the previous order, the motion to reconsider is considered made and laid upon the table, and the President will be immediately notified of the Senate's actions.

The senior Senator from Maryland.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I move to proceed to legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The question is on agreeing to the motion. The motion was agreed to.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I rise today in recognition of Black History Month.

Black History Month provides an opportunity for our Nation collectively

to reflect on and celebrate the contributions and legacies of Black Americans. And while we have chosen this month, February, to engage in collective celebration, we must also remember that we benefit from the contributions and legacies of these great Americans every single day.

Today, I would like to focus my remarks on our Nation's black entrepreneurs. From Madame C.J. Walker to Baltimore's own Reginald F. Lewis and beyond, Black entrepreneurs have long been vital to the success of the American economy.

Unfortunately, throughout history, those who seek to hold back the progress of the Black community view the successes of Black entrepreneurs as a threat.

One need only look to the 1921 Tulsa Massacre—a dark incident in our Nation's history that has belatedly entered our collective consciousness.

White residents of Tulsa, OK, bombed, burned, and destroyed the Greenwood District. In addition to an untold number of lives lost—estimates range from dozens to hundreds—the riot destroyed homes, churches, schools, and businesses in the district. At the time, Greenwood was known as “Black Wall Street” due to its thriving Black middle class and successful businesses, and its destruction was one of the worst instances of racial violence in our Nation's history.

It is with instances like Greenwood and the dozens like it in mind that I stand here today because while Black entrepreneurs no longer work under the threat of such violence, they still face many longstanding systemic barriers.

My late friend and mentor, former Congressman Parren J. Mitchell, believed very strongly that the Federal Government had an important role to play in our efforts to right these historical injustices and support Black entrepreneurs.

In 1977, Congressman MITCHELL fought to pass an amendment to a \$4 billion Federal public works program requiring city and State recipients to set aside 10 percent of the funds for minority-owned businesses. He would go on to call the amendment his proudest congressional accomplishment.

I was incredibly proud last year to build on his legacy by working across the aisle and finally codifying the Minority Business Development Agency, MBDA, and giving the agency the resources and leadership necessary to help support entrepreneurs in the Black and other minority communities.

This accomplishment is particularly important in Maryland, as the Presiding Officer knows, since we are the home to the highest concentration of minority-owned businesses in the country.

While we have made progress, we must also continue working together to address these systemic inequities.

At the height of the pandemic, we came together to create the Paycheck

Protection Program, the PPP program, and we worked in a bipartisan manner to improve the program once it became clear that it was leaving far too many of our most vulnerable small businesses behind.

We invested in non-bank financial institutions like the community depository financial institutions and micro-lenders. We strengthened relationships between the Small Business Administration and our Nation's historically Black colleges and universities and minority-serving institutions. We created grant programs that reduced structural barriers instead of reinforcing them.

Recent studies have shown that these policies directly address the inequities present during the phase 1 PPP, which favored larger businesses. Through thoughtful policy, we made the program more equitable with the share of loans made to minority-owned businesses during phases 2 and 3 of the program in proportion with their overall share of small businesses.

As I speak here today, the Senate is still trying to find a path forward on President Biden's Build Back Better budget, which implements many of the lessons we have learned over the past 2 years. The bill contains many key provisions that will provide the SBA and the MBDA with resources to empower Black entrepreneurs even more.

For instance, the Build Back Better Act would create a direct loan program at the SBA. It would create a new Up-lift Accelerator program to deepen the relationships between SBA and HBCUs, and it would make the SBA existing loan products more accessible and affordable.

The pandemic has demonstrated that when we come together to address the problems in our society free from partisanship and in good faith, we are able to make great strides. It also confirms that the Federal Government has a key role to play in addressing the historic injustices that have harmed—and continue to harm—Black entrepreneurs and the Black community at large.

This Black History Month, let us commit to pairing our words with actions, just as we did during the pandemic. We need to enact these proven policies as quickly as possible. We cannot let this opportunity pass us by.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mrs. FISCHER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

TRIBUTE TO JUDGE JOHN GERRARD

Mrs. FISCHER. Mr. President, I rise today to celebrate the distinguished career of a Nebraska public servant, U.S. District Court Judge John Gerrard.

After just over 10 years on the Federal bench in the District of Nebraska,