



## Podcast Transcript

### The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam: 37th Annual Legislative Seminar – Senator Peter Welch (D-VT)

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**Guest:** Peter Roskam, Heath Shuler, Senator Peter Welch, **Host:** Leeann Lee

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**For questions and comments contact:**



#### **Peter Roskam**

Partner  
Washington, D.C.  
T: 1.202.861.1605 | [proskam@bakerlaw.com](mailto:proskam@bakerlaw.com)



#### **Heath Shuler**

Senior Advisor  
Washington, D.C.  
T: 1.202.861.1763 | [hshuler@bakerlaw.com](mailto:hshuler@bakerlaw.com)

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Lee: Welcome to “The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam.” Former Congressman Peter Roskam leads BakerHostetler’s Federal Policy team. Through interviews with leading members of Congress, Peter provides an insightful, firsthand view into the latest policy and political debates on Capitol Hill.

In today’s episode, Peter is joined at the 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Legislative Seminar in Washington by his BakerHostetler colleague, former Congressman Heath Shuler, and Senator Peter Welch, a Democrat from Vermont. Welch is in his first term in the Senate after serving eight terms representing Vermont in the House. He serves on the Senate Judiciary Committee, the Commerce Committee and the Agriculture Committee, where he chairs the Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy. Welch is a strong advocate for prescription drug affordability, renewable energy production and rural broadband access.

Peter, Heath and Senator Welch discussed Democrats' agenda if the party gains control of the Senate in the midterm elections.

Let's listen in to "The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam."

Shuler: Peter, thank you so much for being here again. And if you guys heard me tell this story last year, Peter and I came in as freshman members together. We were getting to know one another. You start developing these relationships. And Peter asked me one day, he goes, hey, now this is 07. And he says, hey, would you like to go for a run? So, we were in the house gym. I'm thinking, yeah, the next day will be fine. I had a foot injury. And so, running long distance wasn't a great, I wasn't encouraged about that. But I'm thinking, Peter is a few years older than I am. This will be fun. We'll enjoy one another. We'll probably walk more than run. That is what I'm thinking. Well, the biggest mistake, I'm putting my shoes on and I look up and here comes Peter into my section of the locker room and he's got a marathon t-shirt on. I'm quickly trying to decide how in the world am I going to get out of this? But then we start running and Peter is so inquisitive and wants to know about me and I'm trying to learn more about where he, about his state and community. And about halfway through it, I finally grabbed his arm and I looked at him and I said, look, if you don't stop talking and asking me questions, I'll not make it back to the Capitol. Developed a great relationship and I think there will be many, many people on Capitol Hill will tell you this. If there is one senator or one former House member that just exudes the integrity of what it is to be a statesman and to have character and integrity, it is Peter Welch. He is one of the greatest, nicest members of that entire body. And so welcome.

Welch: You wonder why I come back. That was my NFL tryout. When we make out my size chart, I got nixed.

Shuler: Yeah. So, let's jump right in. I hate to just bring politics up right out of the gate, but Bernie Sanders is not going to run for president this year. It makes you, let's use a football, you are a free agent this year when it comes to that. Tell me about the Democratic Party. Tell me about the bench. Tell me about, I know we're not even through the midterms and I'm already looking to '28. What does that look like, not only for our country, but what does that look like for you? What are those priorities? What is the perfect candidate look for Peter Welch.

Welch: Let me give a little context on that, because right now, as we know, the President's numbers are very, very low. That is from a Democratic perspective. Welcome news. But Democratic numbers are pretty bad. So, my view is that on our side, all the drama about Trump, people's views about him, those are baked in. And we're not going to win with a candidate who just is reminding people of the things we think are bad about what is happening with Trump. And I believe that there has to be an aspirational component to whoever is going to be a successful candidate for us.

And that aspirational component always has to include a growth in the economy. It has to be a commitment to solving problems. And the biggest thing, I think it has to be giving people a sense that we care about having policies that make it

possible for folks back home to build their communities. What I'm sensing so much is that all this social media stuff, all the conflict we have in politics, all the partisanship, all the arbitrariness, it is really unraveling that sense that people need, I need, I think we all need, a feeling connected and feeling at the end of the day, the work we do. We don't mind the hard work, right? People work hard. That is what they do. But they want some assurance that at the end of the month, they're going to be a half a step ahead, not necessarily two steps back.

So, there has got to be some capacity for unifying on what I believe are American values, about a commitment to their, not just their family, but to the well-being of the community they're in. And I mean, think about the work that all of you do for your various clients or enterprises, you're advocating for the policies. But embedded in it is a culture in a lot of these businesses that is about the wellbeing of their employees, it is about the wellbeing of their community, and it is about sustainability. So that is not about arbitrary values. That is about shared values. And we're losing that, especially with the way we have such a transactional notion of politics right now, which is radically different from what we had when I was serving with Peter back in the days of Heath and me.

So that is an aspirational element that I think we're going to need to be successful with whoever that candidate is. And keep in mind, I don't know who it is because to some extent, we didn't know who Bill Clinton was until he was Bill Clinton. He came out of nowhere. We had no idea who Barack Obama was until suddenly he was Barack Obama. But they had a capacity to connect. And that is why I really want us to have an open primary. But I think somebody who has those qualities and can display them on the campaign trail where it is not just about trashing Trump, but it is about the aspirational element that I think is so essential for us in political life. And I think it is essential for all of us in whatever it is we do.

Shuler: Can you be a voice of reason? If you look at some of the candidates that we've had, it is been more to the left and it happens in very swing districts or swing states that those more moderate candidates that can get to the independent voter or more moderate Republicans to vote. Is there a way to craft or be a leader in that side from you to say, hey, look, it is great. You may win the primary, but you're going to lose the general election and get more of that moderate side of what Bill Clinton was.

Welch: But let me describe what is moderate, okay? I actually get nervous at that term in some ways because it is not just a split the difference thing, right? You can have intensity, energy, conviction, passion when you're moderate. Moderate to me means that you're willing to listen to the other side. Moderate to me means you've got some humility, that you've got a firm conviction, a firm point of view, but you actually have enough humility to know you're not necessarily always right. And also, what it also means to me is that you appreciate that working hard to include others whose points of view are somewhat different, if you can agree that you're making that half step forward, that that is worth doing. It is not my way or the highway, okay?

And Peter, you were a fantastic legislator that way, and you too, Heath. So, that is the thing about it. And also moderate means that you're understanding that you've got to take into account that you represent everybody. I've never had a primary, or I shouldn't say that. We have a single district, so I have never had to be dealing with the effects of radical gerrymandering, which I think is really destructive. So, I've always felt this obligation to represent the people that didn't vote for me as much as the people who did vote for me. And that is not to say I agree with them, but on the other hand, I have as much obligation to listen to them, be respectful, to try to take into account their legitimate points of view, as I do to the folks who elected me.

Roskam: A few years ago, I was watching you on C-SPAN, and it was a let's join Peter Welch in a town hall meeting. And it was great because it was not just a love fest. There were people that were getting up and they were critiquing you and you didn't take the bait and you were very gracious. And I think part of a gift and an advantage that you have is you're an honest critique. You're able to offer honest critique of your own side, which I always found to be interesting.

And so on toward that end, where do you think, I know looking at the Democratic Party today from the outside, it seems like all of the energy is on the progressive side. It is intense, it is frustrated, and it has, and it is aggressive. And those are not, none of those are bad adjectives, by the way, that. You can, that politics welcomes that. At the same time, there is the pragmatic side that says, okay, well, that is great that you're intense and all those things. You've also got to win an election. We've also got to govern. Walk through what it would be like.

So, let's assume for the sake of argument that both chambers flip and Donald Trump's in the White House. How does that manifest itself? And let's say something specific like IRA credits, the energy credits and that the Trump administration has just gone hammer and tongs against coming out of the IRA, slow walking the permitting, you know what I mean? Really quite aggressive. That is something that you've been active in in the past, know a lot about, care a lot about. Can you fashion or can you contemplate an area where you could say, I think we can work with these guys over this? Or would you get eaten alive by the left if you even articulate that?

Welch: I would not get eaten alive. I mean, let's just, I want to say there is two parts to my answer to you, Peter, to your very good question. Number one, if you're in office, your obligation is to try to have public policy that is beneficial to folks back home and to be able to do the jobs that they're doing with good policy rather than impediments, okay? And another point that this is the heartbreak for me right now in my job. We're arguing about a lot of things, but Congress is totally failing to come close to addressing a lot of these affordability issues. And the challenges that people face in my district, Vermont voted big for Democratic, but they're no different than Idaho or Indiana. And folks are dealing with housing. They're dealing with the cost of healthcare. They're really freaked out about social media and what that does to their kids. They're worried about the impact of the one Big Beautiful Bill on their community hospitals that are such important institutions.

So, when you and I talk, a lot of times the topic wouldn't be, who is on first and how we're going to get one another. We'd be talking about some of these practical things that are challenges in your district and mine. And so, the challenges that are out there are shared. They're bipartisan challenges. And this is the heartbreak for me. Why don't we talk about those challenges that are shared? Because that inevitably leads to a conversation about a shared solution, okay? And that is what is not happening. That is where I believe that Congress is failing. And Trump is not making it easy, alright? And we've gone into something that I think is really dangerous with so much of an orientation towards transactional things as opposed to shared values.

But the other thing that is really harmful now, this partisan gerrymandering is a race to the bottom. I mean, in this every two year redistricting now that we're in is a race to the bottom. In my view, the Republicans and Democrats should do mutually assured destruction here if we keep this up. We ought to both renounce and disarm on that. Because what you're seeing is something as profoundly cynical, and that is the politicians trying to pick their voters instead of the voters picking their leaders. And it is just going to do no good for anybody. And it intensifies that issue, Peter, that you're talking about, because these districts, then the primary is the election that the members have to win. The general's foregone because it is been written for the Republican or Democratic side.

So that is a structural issue. And the fact that we've adopted this and we're doing redistricting in the middle of the decade, it started in Texas and then went to California and then the Cascade fighting fire with fire. But it is so, so destructive for the well-being of our democracy. And to have representatives who actually have to listen to and get along with people in their district that they don't necessarily, didn't necessarily vote for him.

Roskam: I was interested. I sent you a text last year when Elizabeth and I were doing an end-to-end hike in Vermont. And I never thought about that comparison.

Welch: This guy is in shape.

Roskam: I'd never thought about that comparison to other parts of the country, but it was rural. You know what I mean? We're walking by places that were, in some cases, absolutely fabulous and glorious, in some cases struggling, like for sure struggling. And that common thread is really, really interesting. Are you, feels like all I do is watch you on TV, but I don't. But I was watching as you were doing your oversight role, and without a doubt, your close questioning of Secretary Noem led to her being forced out within a couple of days. And it was, she brought in her own controversy. I'm not asking you to comment on that. What is your view on the role of oversight and how it can manifest on both sides? Because it is easier to do oversight on the other party. It is less comfortable to do oversight on your own party. Where do you think, what is the future of oversight?

Welch: Well, it is combat politics right now, more than anything else, and I don't think that is particularly helpful. I mean, my view would be if we had some balance, Congress would be much more permissive in terms of delegation of authority and

latitude, but very, very demanding on oversight in terms of did you follow what you were supposed to do as opposed to micromanaging? Okay? You've got to have some, in what I see with oversight now, it is the only tool the minority has to, but it is really used to try to tear down whoever is before us as opposed to get to the heart of a matter. And also, we're finding enormous resistance from this administration. It's probably been something that's been progressive resistance from the executive. I read something that the Reagan administration put out when he first went in, and it was a beautiful statement about the co-equal branches of government, and he would provide whatever information the Congress is entitled to. Those days don't exist anymore.

So, I do think, ideally, oversight is on substance. Is the program that has been implemented, is it working? Okay? And that is the bigger question. And along the way, there may be some issues of fraud where there is misconduct. And I actually think that is where the Justice Department should be in and people should be held accountable. But I do think what's happened is that oversight has got too much of the gotcha in it as opposed to what is the underlying public policy that we're trying to achieve with the program. And just as in the enterprises where you work or you represent, you've got to give some latitude to your managers and your staff to make reasonable judgments in carrying out the assigned responsibility and have some respect for that. And they're not going to all work out. But on the other hand, if they're just messing up and not doing the job, there has got to be that oversight and that review.

Roskam: You've rolled your sleeves up on some of the permitting reform stuff in the past.

Welch: We have got to have permitting reform.

Roskam: Alright, so let me ask you this. We had Kevin Cramer was here about an hour ago and he was very upbeat about the possibility. He is a savvy operator. He is not naive and he understands the way of the world. And he was, because we were pressing him a little bit on, look, permitting reform has to include discussions around renewables, et cetera. And he was like, he could get there. And I don't think it was just for the benefit of the audience. He had concerns about some of the socialized costs of transmission lines and maybe too ambitious. And there were some no goes for him. But what is your sense?

And he was describing, and the more I think about it, the more I think he is right. He is describing an inevitability to this. In other words, the energy demand is cresting and accelerating at such a breathtaking rate that we have got to figure this out. And the dam, he didn't say this, I think this is mine, but the dam is going to break. And so why not figure it out and be smart about it? What is your, as a man of the left, what would be helpful, do you think, moving forward? Is it just more pressure that has got to come? Is this a timing thing in politics?

Welch: I think there's two things. One, politically Democrats have traditionally been against permit reform because they've used the permit system to oppose fossil fuel projects that they were against, okay? So going to a place where we realize that to get the clean energy projects that we do favor, we actually have to build

things and get them done. That means we want to have, I want, and we have some debate within the Democratic side. I want us to be able to get to yes or no sooner rather than later and without immense expense. Now that means, and also I have confidence that if you have a permit reform system that works and it is fair and it is on the level, and obviously there'll be some fossil fuel projects that are among those that get considered as well as clean energy projects, I believe that then the market where clean energy projects are actually much cheaper in terms of the energy cost, that our net carbon emissions are going to come down substantially if we have the capacity to permit much more quickly. So, I come from a point of view that tells me that my goal of a cleaner environment, cleaner fuels will be achieved with a permit reform even though it might be some fossil fuel projects that I may not personally like.

So, that is one but second, we've got this elaborate system. It is sort of like our healthcare system in a way. It's been created over a hundred years and you've got all these various jurisdictions and within these jurisdictions there is an incumbent bias towards protecting that system. And permit reform is going to require disruption of some of those arrangements. And I do believe you say inevitability, but it is got to be done sooner rather than later because the demand for electricity we all know is going up. And our capacity to be able to provide the electrons that we need in the internet economy is essential to our competitiveness and well-being. And of course, as you know, China has made a decision about electrification. They're going all in, and they are able to do these big wind projects from 2,000 miles away and get the electricity to Beijing. So, we're going to be at a real competitive disadvantage if we don't do it. But I think the Democrats are coming around to being aggressively in favor of having a rational permit reform system.

Shuler: Where does nuclear fall in that category? Where does nuclear fall?

Welch: We'd support nuclear. I mean, there is a waste issue there, but I think you're seeing a nuclear, especially this concept of small nuclear, that is definitely part of what could be the future.

Roskam: I think it is interesting when you're describing that permitting process and the niche regulators and so forth, it reminds me of a friend of mine who is, he was a kicker for the Chicago Bears and he kicked a game-winning field goal. He tells the story of being out to dinner with the team and he is looking for some extra butter for his baked potato. And all the people around the table, the waitress comes around and everybody says, hey, you know who this is? This is Bob Thomas. He just won the game. It was like an unbelievable thing. And she said, You know who I am? I'm the person with the butter.

Welch: That is pretty good. And that is the price you need it at the point.

Roskam: There is an underlying, every regulated entity here today, everybody who is dealing with whatever it happens to be has a story of a regulator that has been overwrought or over-characterized or unfair and so forth. And you run into this all the time. Is part of permitting reform rolling those people? Number one. And then

the second thing is there is a danger if somebody reaches out to you, some Vermont business. They reach out to you and you ask them to run interference and you appropriately run interference with an agency. Well, then the agency downstream, somebody is like, oh, you think you're going to reach out to the senator and put me on the spot?

Welch: This is what I'm going to do to you.

Roskam: Yeah. And it gets all passive aggressive and it is very, very difficult to deal with. And you can't even do anything about it because the more you think you're helping, the more you're making their life miserable. So how do you create a permitting reform regime that makes sense where people go, okay, these are the rules and this is how we're going?

Welch: Well, I mean, this is why this is a shared problem, right? Going back to what I was saying before. I mean, you can be a clean energy utility or person. You can be a fossil fuel person, but it is a do you want to waste all your money and delay? You only get a yes or no you want to get a sooner rather than later. And what helps with the bipartisanship is that let's say I'm supporting a permit reform. There'll be people, and this has happened to me in Vermont where we've got very much clean energy orientation, people will get mad at me because I'm going to let fossil, they would be fearful that I'm letting some quote bad projects forward. If I'm doing that and I've got some bipartisan support, including some other Democrats, in the bipartisanship, it is a signal that something is on the level here as opposed to just the partisan approach to things. That is absolutely number one.

Number two, I mean, I talk a lot about this at home. I was with the Shelburne Selectboard the other day, and they want to do a bike path. We love bike paths in Vermont, right? And the bike path has a categorical exemption from having to go through NEPA. You know what that is, right? Except in order to prove that you're qualified for the categorical exemption, the way it works for us now, you got to go through NEPA. So, a bike path costs...

Roskam: Oh, that is so good.

Welch: I mean, it is like you want to pound your head. So, a bike path for me is three feet wide and Heath is getting out of my way when I'm riding my bike down the dirt path. But that is an example of how overzealous it gets. And we just got to be absolutely, I think, result oriented. And saying result oriented doesn't mean you bypass legitimate environmental and safety concerns. It just means you do it sooner rather than later and you don't create a process that allows for endless delay because it is \$2 million a mile to build a bike path. That makes no sense.

So being assertive about that as a Democrat, one of our leaders on this is Sheldon Whitehouse, who is really one of the most prominent environmentalists in the country, and Martin Heinrich. The two of them are very, very solid 100% environmentalist, but they get it. Now, one of the impediments here that's really broken trust is that we had all these projects that major companies invested in,



offshore wind projects that have just been categorically written off. And that is outrageous. I mean, because that is the worst of, that is the arbitrariness where you actually go through the whole process. You spend all of that money, you get the approval, and then there is an arbitrary decision, no, your project is not going to go. And that would be as true if it were fossil or if it were a wind project. And that has been, in all candor, an impediment to the progress on the negotiations that Sheldon and Martin have been engaged with.

Roskam: Well Senator Welch, thank you. Look at your watch. We're getting you out of here on time. So, when your staff gets an invitation next year, they'll go, you know what? Those guys, they move the product. We get the facts back.

Welch: Right. I want to know how many people are applying for some of that \$1.776 billion relief fund.

Roskam: Thank you, Peter.

Lee: Thank you, Peter, Heath and Senator Welch. If you have any questions for Peter, his full contact information is in the show notes. As always, thanks for listening to BakerHosts and "The Cloakroom with Peter Roskam."

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