



FERC Podcast Transcript

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Former Commissioner Colette Honorable reflects on her term at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission

Craig Cano: Welcome to Open Access, the podcast series of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, or FERC. I'm Craig Cano, your host. FERC is an independent regulatory agency that oversees the interstate transmission of electricity, natural gas and oil; reviews proposals to build interstate natural gas pipelines and liquefied natural gas terminals; and licenses nonfederal hydropower projects. FERC also protects the reliability of the high-voltage interstate transmission system through mandatory reliability standards, and it monitors interstate energy markets to ensure that everyone in those markets is playing by the rules.

Today on Open Access, Mary O'Driscoll talks with former Commissioner Colette Honorable, who reflects on her time at the Commission following her departure at the end of June. Commissioner Honorable served one term at FERC, having been nominated by President Obama and sworn in on January 5, 2015. Prior to that she served more than 7 years as a member of the Arkansas Public Service Commission, including a term as its president. Commissioner Honorable is also a past president of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners.

Mary O'Driscoll: Colette Honorable, welcome to the Open Access podcast, and if I may say so myself we're really sorry to be losing you.

Former Commissioner Colette Honorable: Thank you Mary, I'm sad to be going. It has been a wonderful time here.

Mary O'Driscoll: You're leaving FERC after serving two-and-a-half years as a commissioner here. What would you point to as your greatest accomplishments during your time here? What would you like to be remembered for?

Colette Honorable: Thank you for the question Mary. As I said on Twitter recently, and really I guess Shakespeare said it first, parting is such sweet sorrow and I truly mean that. I've enjoyed being here at FERC so much and coming to work here with our colleagues each and every day. I feel incredibly fortunate to have been appointed by President Obama and confirmed unanimously by the Senate, and I am blessed to leave this agency as I came — with strong bipartisan support and strong stakeholder relationships from people of all perspectives. This is truly an incredible place to work with such a dedicated group of public servants.

What I'd like to be known for, I humbly suggest, is that I really tried to give my best to this calling and that I respected all people, heard all points of view and really tried to

work well with others. It's hard to summarize the last two-and-a-half years because we've accomplished so much here together. I came here as a champion for the consumer, and I believe I've brought an important perspective to Washington all the way from Arkansas. Just before I started here a fellow regulator reminded me to never forget where I came from, and I hope I have been true to that.

Our work here on reliability, resilience, and security is so crucial. I'm glad to have had the opportunity to brag about this important work that FERC carries out day in and day out to keep the lights on. In addition, we've consistently moved the needle on gas/electric coordination and we've made sure that our rules allow for all sources and resources to compete in wholesale energy markets. We still have work to do on that front, but I am really proud of the progress that we've made thus far.

One element I can't talk enough about, Mary, is workforce diversity. I've done this since the time that I served as NARUC president and it is still an important area of our work today. When people in the energy sector talk about diversity, they are usually talking about generation resource mix. This is of course important, but we also need to talk more about the diversity of our workforce, about workforce accession both within government and in the industry at large. I am proud of FERC's consistent top rankings among the government's best places to work. And I have to admit that I've never worked in such a diverse environment. It's been truly an amazing thing to behold because I think it has made our agency better.

I really think the energy sector could learn from what we are doing here.

Mary O'Driscoll: Is there anything that's been surprising to you about being on the Commission for the past couple of years?

Colette Honorable: Well that's a good question. I think the thing that surprised me the most when I came to FERC was how quickly I became attached to this place and our incredible staff. I truly love this work, and I love coming to 888 First Street, Northeast, each and every day. I love how hard we work, how much we get done, how diverse we are, and how professional we are. Ever since we lost our quorum I've often been asked what we are doing at FERC these days as if we're twiddling our thumbs, and people always seem surprised when I tell them how busy we are. I really have to take this moment to applaud our staff. They've kept plugging away despite our inability to issue orders in several circumstances, and I've often said to our colleagues that they are what makes this place so great.

Mary O'Driscoll: FERC normally has five members, though now with you leaving there will only be one, and you've been part of a Commission that has had no quorum for the past six months. But back in the day when you had a quorum, you had all these different points of view, different experiences, different ideologies. So, in your experience how does the Commission manage to work together when you have those kinds of personal differences?

Colette Honorable: That question really makes me recall one of the first things that I dealt with when I joined FERC as a Commissioner. One of our highest profile issues then that we dealt with upon my arrival was our outreach with the Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, over the Clean Power Plan. We certainly did not have the luxury of wondering how the courts or new administrations would treat the Clean Power Plan, and so we were called upon to provide advice and counsel regarding the Clean Power Plan's impact on reliability. And so despite our diverse views on the proposal we came together as an organization and provided that necessary advice and counsel based upon our mandate from Congress. If you recall, we managed to send the EPA a letter signed by all five commissioners — with very different ideological positions — with one single, focused message: That the EPA should consider reliability mechanisms or a reliability assurance mechanism in its proposal. Clearly the EPA listened, and I believe it was because we spoke with one voice.

Now to me this demonstrates the importance of the independence of the regulator and continuing to honor our mission. No matter what we as individual Commissioners thought of the Clean Power Plan, we came together under that mission and we truly made a difference.

When we come here as new Commissioners, I think we are all struck by the nonpartisan nature of our work and the need to heed that. In the two-and-a-half years I've been here, the overwhelming majority of our orders, well over 90%, have been issued unanimously. I think that our track record speaks for itself.

Mary O'Driscoll: Since you been here you've been an important voice with all the state regulatory experience that you had, both within NARUC and with the Arkansas Public Service Commission. What are some of the observations that you have after having served both as a state and a federal regulator?

Colette Honorable: Great question, and interestingly when I came here I wondered if I would find it a bit difficult or uncomfortable transitioning from being a state regulator to becoming a federal regulator, and it really wasn't at all. I think the best lesson that I learned from my days as a state regulator at NARUC is to respect ours, to respect authority of the states as well as the diversity of the states. Early in my career in Arkansas I was taught to disagree without being disagreeable. I've brought that lesson to my work here as well. The decisions we make have such a profound impact and are nonpartisan, so it is important for us to work well together, to work collegially and respectfully, even when we disagree. And I'm proud to say we've done that during my tenure here.

When we work cooperatively and collaboratively, we will always reach a better result for the consumer. This is especially true now as we continue our analysis of wholesale energy and capacity markets. As our May 1 and 2 technical conference proved, states will continue to actively develop energy policy. So therefore it is incumbent that we work well together with our state colleagues because although we come from different

perspectives, we all share the same goal — keeping the lights on at just and reasonable rates.

I am optimistic that the Commission and states will continue to work well together in the future because historically that has been the case.

Mary O’Driscoll: What kind of advice would you give to the new Commissioners who come on board?

Colette Honorable: Well of course, as I’m walking out the door, Commissioners Emeritus often have wonderful advice for new Commissioners. It has been a pleasure to know both Rob [Powelson] and Neil [Chatterjee], and also to offer a few thoughts of my own that they should take with a grain of salt. But here are a couple. Number one is to be ready. Certainly our new colleagues will face a massive backlog of activity, and unlike me, they may not have the luxury of voting “present” on matters for a few weeks as they get settled and hire their staff members.

I know both Rob and Neil, and believe they are both well-qualified for these posts. I’d also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and congratulate Rich Glick. The administration just announced its intent to nominate Rich, and I wish him well also. I would encourage our new colleagues to immerse themselves in the work, hire a staff that complements their strengths and weaknesses, and above all to be nimble. The work here is incredibly complex and dynamic. What is a big issue on Tuesday may not be the biggest one on Wednesday, and so on. It is imperative that the Commissioners be nimble and ready on Day One. I am confident that they will be.

I would also urge our new colleagues to listen to all perspectives before rendering a decision, and to be open to new and different ways to resolve problems.

Mary O’Driscoll: So what are your plans now that you’re leaving FERC?

Colette Honorable: Well first and foremost I will have to unpack these boxes that I will take away from here, I can accumulate quite a bit in two-and-a-half years I’ve realized. But I also hope to take a long weekend and enjoy the Fourth of July and really take time to appreciate what is great about this incredible nation. And then I will get back to work.

I look forward to remaining in the energy sector. I look forward to being involved in the development of energy policy going forward, both domestically and internationally. I have been fully committed to this calling for nearly 10 years now as a regulator, and I think that is long enough. I’ve been honored to meet and work with our FERC staff and to serve the public. This work has indeed been a blessing, and I know that I’m a better person for having carried it out.

I often say that this is a new day in the energy sector, and soon it will be a new chapter for me. I am grateful for this opportunity and I’d like to thank you Mary, our FERC staff,

and all of the stakeholders who engage with us here at FERC for making this such a wonderful place to spend this chapter of my career.

Mary O'Driscoll: Well thank you again for coming on to Open Access, and if I may quote someone who tweeted to you recently, with your departure from FERC “there are no more Honorables in the federal government.”

Colette Honorable: I recall seeing that. I think we can find a few I said in response! Thank you.

Mary O'Driscoll: Thank you so much.

Craig Cano: Thank you for listening to Open Access, the podcast series of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Unless otherwise noted, the views expressed on these podcasts are personal views and do not necessarily express the views of individual Commissioners, or of the Commission as a whole. This podcast is a production of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Office of External Affairs, Leonard Tao, director. We will be updating our posts when we've got news, so be sure to check out our website www.ferc.gov and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to find out when our next podcast airs.