

Jerome Foster (courtesty photo)

Oliver Milman

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If a week is a long time in politics, the past year has been an eternity for Jerome Foster. In the opening stanza of 2020, the 18-year-old was holding forlorn weekly protests outside the White House calling for action on the climate crisis. Now, he has been ushered into the seat of American power to help craft climate policy.

In a sign of the growing political clout of the youth climate movement that has blossomed around the world in recent years, Foster has been included among a group of advisers to Joe Biden who will inform the US president on issues related to environmental justice, where low-income communities and people of color face the greatest fallout from climate change and pollution.

"I didn't expect this to happen so soon, it was like, 'Wow, this is crazy,'" said Foster, who posted a tweet summing up the dramatic upgrade in his influence.

Foster added: "I'm the only person under 40 on the whole panel, so when I got there I was like, 'Am I supposed to be here?' But it was their intention to bring in the youth perspective on climate change. I was a bit startled at first but now I'm getting used to it."

It's a remarkable personal journey for the teenager, a student of computer science in New York City who in early 2019 started solo protests in front of a White House occupied by Donald Trump, a president who routinely mocked climate science and dismantled dozens of regulations aimed at reducing planet-heating emissions.

Every Friday for 58 weeks in a row, Foster would stand near the perimeter of the White House in Lafayette Square brandishing a placard that read "School strike for climate," an invocation of the global school strike movement sparked by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg.

Foster said Thunberg, who joined him for a protest when she visited the US two years ago, has "changed the entire conversation" about climate change.

For the first month or so it was a lonely experience beyond the encouragement of the odd sympathetic European tourist, before Foster was joined by an unlikely ally.

"The second person to join me was a Trump supporter. It was wild because he was just walking past yelling and cursing at me that it was all a hoax," Foster said. The two started talking and the older man, who used a walking frame, acknowledged he was concerned about plastic pollution in the nearby Chesapeake Bay.

"He didn't understand CO2 because he couldn't see it himself, but he understood how plastic pollution was a major impact on the climate crisis," Foster said. "He actually joined me, but only for 10 minutes. He felt embarrassed because his Trump friends there were mad at him, yelling at him that he'd joined the dark side."

Foster is not quite as starry-eyed over a great bipartisan coming together on the climate crisis as he once was, however. From the age of five, he was watching nature documentaries, becoming increasingly alarmed over environmental destruction, a concern that his parents, civil rights organizers who helped the Million Man March on Washington in 1995, helped channel.

"A sort of fire was lit inside of me," Foster said. "My parents always told me that you can't just sit there and mope or be angry, no one is going to care. You have to actually do something."

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It wasn't until Trump's election in 2016, however, that Foster's concerns were sharpened and became more political. "I was in middle school when he elected and now I'm in my first year in college, so my entire high school was defined by Trump," he said. "I didn't pay attention to the 2016 election, I wasn't political at all. And then after the election I understood the power and impact in electing one incredibly bad

person to office. I was like 'wow, this is really setting us back.'"

Foster took to Capitol Hill, completing internships with John Lewis, the late congressman and civil rights titan, and the Citizens Climate Lobby, a group devoted to developing a sort of bipartisan union between Republicans and Democrats over climate change. But after seeing several climate measures gummed up in a Congress where many Republicans denied basic scientific tenets and some Democrats were wary of pushing the issue, Foster became frustrated.

"I just tried to reach out to anyone who would help bridge the gap, I was wearing 10,000 hats at the same time," he said. "That has totally changed now. It's not about bipartisanship anymore because bipartisanship is not functional at this level. Every time you seek bipartisanship, Republicans are still on that talking point that climate change isn't real."

"I thought 'I'm done convincing people. We're just going to work around you.' We don't have time to be slowed down by people that don't understand and don't acknowledge the science. It's far beyond that. You got 50 years to read the papers. You had 50 years to understand this crisis and you still are doing nothing. So we're done spoon feeding you. We're moving on, next step, next phase."

Foster has since thrown himself into a dazzling array of climate initiatives, founding the youth voting and advocacy organization OneMillionOfUs, an immersive technology company called TAU VR that built a virtual reality environ around climate change and Climate Reporter, an international youth-led news outlet on the climate crisis. He has marched and campaigned and given speeches, most notably to the United Nations.

Through this, Foster has banded together with other young people both horrified and incandescent that their futures are being plunged into fiery uncertainty by the actions of their parents' and grandparents' generations. While the youth climate movement has inspired, and perhaps shamed, many older people, Foster hopes the activism will be redundant before too long.

"I talk to other activists and every single person has something they did before activism and something they want to do after it," he said. "They want to go back to doing what they love to do, to have a career, to be young persons again. No-one wants to sit here and beg politicians to do the things that they were hired to do. In 10 years' time I don't want to still be fighting about clean air and clean water. That's

a complete and utter waste of a lifetime, to fight for bare bones things."

Recently, Foster sat through the first meeting of the White House environmental justice body, a five-hour affair that took place over Zoom was was hailed by the US vice-president, Kamala Harris, one of the attendees, as an "historic moment."

Even in this setting of established activists, Foster said there was one person who questioned why young people should be put front and centre of this work, a quibble he responded to with an email after the meeting. The group is now working on the language of an executive order on environmental justice that Biden aims to sign by May.

Robert Bullard, a foundational environmental justice campaigner and fellow White House adviser, said he met Foster in 2019 and was "super impressed" with him. The White House "needs this intergenerational voice and energy pushing for transformative change," Bullard said.

Foster said he has been "pleasantly surprised" by Biden, who has signed a flurry of executive actions to tackle the climate crisis. The president, Foster said, is receptive to climate science that's presented to him and to the voices of young activists. But a huge challenge still lies ahead if the US, and the wider world, is to avoid calamitous heatwaves, flooding and other climate-driven disasters.

"It's still a daunting task, the task of stopping the climate crisis is still no easier," said Foster. "But I'm a lot more optimistic now. Yeah, I'm hopeful."