

**SPEECH GIVEN BY STATE OF WISCONSIN LIEUTENANT  
GOVERNOR MANDELA BARNES AT THE WISCONSIN  
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MANDELA BARNES\*

I want to thank everybody for being here. I want to thank you for the wonderful introduction that I heard in the background. I'm really excited to be here, really excited to have a chance to have this conversation with you all, and—I am, again, Mandela Barnes, proudly serving as Lieutenant Governor for the State of Wisconsin. Thank you again, Professor Klug, and the Wisconsin International Law Journal for inviting me to be the keynote speaker here today. This is a wonderful topic that—well, the topic isn't wonderful, but I love the chance to be able to talk about it because it's important that we find solutions, and the solutions are going to come from all over the place, and I truly believe that some of our solutions to combat climate change are going to come from some of the most unexpected places. However, we all have a role to play, whether we know what that role is or we don't, but having a chance to be involved in these sort of discussions, bringing people in from different backgrounds, people from different disciplines, people who will go on to different professions is what gives me so much joy. And that's what makes the conversation a wonderful one to have, because I truly believe that there is a unifying aspect in addressing climate change, because this is the defining issue of this generation. And I know that the symposium is seeking to analyze the developments and the advancements of climate change work and advocacy. I couldn't be more proud.

I truly think that Wisconsin could be the leading state—could be leading in the entire world—when it comes to addressing climate change. Wisconsin is a place that is home to so much innovation. Already, we were

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\* Mandela Barnes is Wisconsin's 45th Lt. Governor - the state's second-ever Black statewide elected official - former member of the State Legislature and ran a record-breaking U.S. Senate campaign. As Lt. Governor, Mandela worked closely with Governor Evers to help Wisconsin recover from the pandemic and served as the chair of the Governor's Task Force on Climate Change. As Chair of the Task Force, Mandela brought together a diverse group of members to develop a Climate Change Report that centered environmental justice.

a leader in terms of renewable energy. We were a leader in terms of sustainability. We took an eight year pause at some point, but I'm happy to say that we are back on track, taking things seriously, developing and implementing real plans and solutions that will push us forward. There is no debate that climate change is here. I know I'm in a law school and saying that there is no debate is, you know, sort of sacrilegious, but there is no debate. Climate change is here. It's impacting lives, and we have to do something about it. And now, through my work and my travel as lieutenant governor, I've been able to witness firsthand the impacts that the climate crisis has on our state. I've been able to travel to a bunch of different places and talk with people, too. I got to go to Madrid in 2019 for COP25, and, you know, the Midwest is often left out of the climate change conversation. People think of the coasts, they'll think of California, they'll think of Florida but they don't always think of a Wisconsin, or a Michigan, or an Illinois, or an Iowa, you know. A couple of years ago, there was a hurricane in Iowa, the derecho, and you think about the devastating impacts that so often get ignored. Here in Wisconsin, we have compromised waterways with the Great Lakes warming up at the rate that they are warming, Lake Superior warming up quicker than the rest of them, threatening fisheries and food systems in general. And with that being said, the solutions that exist in Florida or California are going to be different than those in Wisconsin. You know, we are in our second winter right now. They don't have that in California or Florida, there's so much more sun, and that just pushes us to think differently. I think it pushes us to be more innovative because we still have to catch up regardless. Now, as I said, I've been able to witness firsthand impacts that people are experiencing—especially in our rural communities—but people from all walks of life know the impacts of the climate crisis and the impact that it continues to have on our communities, on our health, and our economy. Wisconsin was way behind, as I mentioned before, in tackling climate change. We were way behind after we were way ahead, which is just mind-boggling. But we want to take immediate action. On election night in 2018 the first words that came out of my mouth were “We’re bringing science back!” and that’s because we knew that we were losing scientists from our Department of Natural Resources where there was early retirements and what felt like routine purges of people who tried to speak the words “climate change,” and that’s because the words “climate change” were

scrubbed from state websites, and even more—people weren't allowed to speak freely about what was actually happening.

So, with that being said, one of the first things we did was join the US Climate Alliance, which is a bipartisan coalition of states that sought to meet the goals of the Paris Climate Accord after the US had been formally withdrawn. Now this is a coalition that made up over half of the US population in terms of the states that were members of the US Climate Alliance. We set new clean energy goals for the state, and we created the Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy, which leads the state's efforts in fighting the impacts of climate change through programs and policies that support the use of clean energy and technology. And that Office is also in the final stages of finishing our state's clean power plan, which I'm incredibly excited about. There is a public listening, a public input session, that goes along with that. The Office is coordinating with our state agencies, stakeholders, and partners as well to finalize the clean power plan for the state, which is long overdue, but I'm so incredibly excited and thankful for the work of the director of that office, Maria Redmond. We will see that clean power plan very soon—hopefully before the summer.

And then we created the office, or—excuse me, created the Governor's Task Force on Climate Change, and I'm proud to have been able to serve as chair of that task force. Early in the administration, Governor Evers signed Executive Order #52, which created that task force. Now unfortunately, we haven't always—well, we've never had the legislature that seemed to want to play ball, seemed to want to accept the fact that climate change is devastating this state. I remember when—and this was just a couple months ago—when some members of the legislature who did understand and got it, introduced a package of legislation. The response from the speaker was that it sounded like some liberal wish list from Madison and Milwaukee, which completely ignored the reality that our farmers are dealing with when we're dealing with these never-ending rainy seasons, historic droughts, historic flooding, or weather events that have compromised our crops and our food systems. It completely ignores tourism across the state that is impacted, compromised, and threatened by climate change. It just completely ignores the reality of so many people across the state who've had to experience historic weather event after historic weather event, be it a polar vortex, be it a multi-tornado storm system, or a one hundred five-hundred-year flood. And regardless, you know, the inaction of the legislature, some things that we have been able

to move through executive order, we've taken those opportunities to do so. As I mentioned, the task force is one of them. And I'm honored to have served as the chair of the Task force to lead the critical work assembling a bipartisan coalition of leaders—we have a bipartisan group of legislators. We have people who don't typically sit in the same rooms with each other get involved in conversations, people who, honestly, have been subject of each other's press releases in the past before, and thing is, people would talk around each other, people would talk over each other, but a lot of times these folks hadn't been in a room to talk to each other. And so, there were some of our youth climate activists, which was very special for me because when we first took office, a group of either high school students or just early college students came to the office, you know, with their concerns about climate change—and they came in hot! You know, they were—they were upset, and rightfully so, right? But it was just like, it was a little—you know, it was—it got a little tense. I'm like, "You do realize I will support everything you're saying? We are absolutely on the same page." But, you know, it was probably one of the first times that the door had been opened for them, and so, there was a lot of pent-up aggression. But with that being said, one of the people who showed up ended up on the task force, because I said, "Alright, well, I respect the commitment. I think that we need your energy, we need this enthusiasm." And we got one of the younger people on the Task force, which was a very necessary voice for us to have there. We had our traditional climate advocacy groups, but we also had utility companies, we also had labor unions, we had small businesses, large businesses, we had farmers, and just people from all walks of life representing organizations that hadn't been heard in the past. We had tribal leadership as well on this task force, and we heard from experts, we held public listening sessions, and we also had just a lot of healthy discussion over the course of the work of the task force. Over a thousand people from across the state participated in one way or another, and all—and someone, a person—at least one person from all but three counties in Wisconsin participated in some sort of way. And this resulted in a final report of fifty-five recommendations that span nine different sectors: climate justice and equity, energy, transportation, agriculture, resilient systems, clean economy, education, food systems, and forestry. I always have to count those off, because I often forget, and with that we were able to center environmental justice in this work every step of the way and we did this in a way that it hadn't been done before. We brought

together, again, those voices that had been unheard in the past and we connected people that had been disconnected in the past. And I'm proud of the works at the table for our administration's climate change and environmental justice policy in the past budget, which included the creation of the Office of Environmental Justice with a chief resilience officer, the creation of a program to help low income energy customers, requiring a public service commission to evaluate the social costs of carbon on our health and our economy, worker training and funding for green jobs, home bill financing to help make renewable energy more affordable, and funding to build more resilient communities and so much more.

And I'm proud that the work has also again helped inform the Clean Energy Plan that is currently being developed by the Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy, and with that, this plan outlines specific strategies that directly address climate change, that prioritize environmental justice, that also ensures accelerated movement towards a strong and clean economy, which is long overdue. Now, the Clean Energy Plan includes four pathways to create momentum and action towards a clean and reliable energy future, including ways to promote clean energy technology development, to maximize energy efficiency, to modernize our infrastructure and our energy, and to innovate transportation. And we can't stress the importance that clean energy will be to our present and our future enough, especially solar, but what we still need is people to come together and to think again more deeply about the other alternatives that may be present to really consider and define what clean energy can look like and debate before—not even debate—the conversation with people before about nuclear, for instance. I'm a little more hesitant personally on nuclear just because, where do we cite these things? the approval process, and then also there's the waste aspect, and it's hard to make the argument that it is clean energy if there's waste. So, there's still healthy debates that should be had. I think that we're still a long way off—we're obviously a long way off from where we need to be.

Technology is changing so rapidly and that's where I see the role of our university system coming into play to show real leadership to take us to that next level. I'm truly—deeply confident in the ability of our school system, whether it's the university system or our technical schools, to be able to get us where we need to be. Now, this work is far from done, but the climate crisis has been hundreds of years in the making;

unfortunately, there has been hundreds of years of denial also. There's just been this lack of willingness to accept reality, and as I mentioned before the Midwest is often forgotten, but we still have those negative impacts, heat waves, floods, crop yield impacts, and so on. And so, it is important to acknowledge some of the strengths that we have in fighting climate change including vast land potential for windmill and solar development and multi-use land for people in more rural areas that have land that is unused. Yeah, well let's do all we can to maximize the potential, add additional revenue streams for our farmers who have been dealing with some really difficult times over the last couple of decades. And we also have water resources for hydro power, and now our partners in the federal government can learn a lot from the work that the states have been doing in the absence of federal leadership over the past years because in the absence of state leadership, local government was getting it done. There were cities, towns, and villages all across Wisconsin that set clean energy goals and they did it. Most of them with very little help and others with very little fanfare. Some felt like they did it in secret because—seriously—there was a threat of preemption prior to our administration. You know—I remember when I was a legislator, when they passed the ban on plastic bag bans that prohibited local government from enacting legislation to, you know, ban plastic bags in communities and so, with that being said, a lot of people probably were scared that doing the right thing may cost them in some sort of way. In cities like River Falls, they transitioned all of their municipal operations to 100 percent renewable energy, and it felt like nobody knew about it. And we found out about it, and we invited them to present a task force so they could talk to other leaders about how to get it done, but you know, that was the thing that was happening at the local level because there wasn't leadership. And again, when we were pulling out of the Paris Climate Agreement, so many states said that we're still going to get it done, and I do feel as if a lot of the framework that was established by the states will help us as we all pursue federal legislation because states can't just write themselves checks like that.

We need help, we need funding, we need support from the federal government to make this a reality, and with that being said, there can't be a one size fits all approach. As I've mentioned, the coastal solutions are not the Midwest solutions, but if we work together, we'll be able to solve all the problems in totality. So one of the things, as I mentioned, with the federal government learning about the work that we've been doing the past

several years, using what we've been doing here in Wisconsin, using what states that have already made the transition—and one thing too is this work is overly politicized for some reason, but in states like Iowa who have a Republican controlled legislature, a Republican governor, and they get about 60 percent of their energy from wind as of a couple years ago, and I'm pretty sure that that has increased. Now granted, they have more opportunities from wind, just where they are positioned; however, they understand it and I've had conversations with the Republican Lieutenant Governor in Iowa about it. He's just like, "I don't know why people aren't more serious about this." And whether he's going to sit and have a climate change conversation with me, he'll have a conversation about saving money, and it seems that is what—that's what gets them going. But, you know, whatever, many paths to the mountain top. If, you know, that's their solution, you know there is a financial aspect of it. On multiple fronts, states can save money by investing in renewable energy rather than relying on fossil fuels, but there's also the health costs for communities.

There's also so many other costs that aren't necessarily dollars and cents, but getting the support that we need, it'll take real grass roots organizing, it'll take, you know, people from all over multiple disciplines, people who aren't specifically or explicitly in the climate change space to come together to help make it happen. Now I'm not going to lie, this is absolutely an uphill battle, it will take the continued advocacy of people here today using your diverse experiences, your expertise, your voices, to demand climate action from every level of government. And now the existential threats that we continue to face, like the climate crisis, these are all interrelated and the systemic issues that are baked into everything that we do as a society, and it's going to take a lot of discomfort to break those molds. Now environmental justice in Wisconsin is the disproportionate impact that communities of color and low-income communities experience in regards to climate change. And I remember during the task force's work our very first meeting we opened with an environmental justice training and there was a state senator there who was just blown away because he just never considered these things. He just never had to think about the environmental justice piece of it, like he was an environmentalist I would say so, like he was a person who committed much of himself and his legislative work to address environmental concerns, but the specifics and a nuance that just wasn't up his alley. And like alright, even some of the most well-intentioned people miss the mark.

You can even think about the beginning of the environmentalist movement, this was people who had enough wealth and enough means to explore and enjoy the outdoors and didn't want to compromise so they banded together to do something about it to stop deforestation, to stop pollution so that they could enjoy spaces that were pretty exclusive. And you know, was the overall benefit good for all of us? Yeah! yes we'll not act like that's not the case, but so many people have been left out because of how exclusive the environmental movement was—is or had been traditionally, but now that we see the impacts are more far reaching, the impacts are absolutely being felt all over, disproportionately on communities with the least means, it's important for us to take that into consideration and act as such.

But with that being said, a lot of this has been brought on by historical lack of access to resources and decision-making institutions, and this puts an unjust risk of damaging health conditions for communities in addition to everything else, and in addition to loss of livelihood—loss of life in instances as well. And we have some specific examples, like superfund sites, and nationally one in four Black and Hispanic Americans live within three miles of a superfund site. This is a place that is so inappropriately named, this is where hazardous waste is dumped with no corporate liability. It's super for these corporations that can just get away with almost anything, but this can result in elevated levels of lead in children's blood and also prolonged health issues. Wisconsin holds a total of thirty-six superfund sites that span every single region of this state. And then there's also the energy burden, and Milwaukee studies show that Black and Hispanic neighborhoods contribute more of their income on gas and electric utility bills than their counterparts. Households below the federal poverty level spend close to 20 percent of their income on energy bills, while the average burden of a household of color is 5 percent, in a white neighborhood that burden is at 2.1 percent. And energy burdens compound in high eviction rates and high asthma rates disproportionately impact families of color and low-income families.

Now in my work, especially through the task force, again we recruited a diverse coalition for that very reason, so we wouldn't keep repeating the same old mistakes. We focused on listening to the voices that were unheard by past leaders in the state and the country, these are the voices whose air and water were likely to be polluted, these are the areas in the communities that are far less likely to be involved in the policy

making that determines the direction that their lives will often take. Now again, anything less than taking that approach will continue a long pattern of environmental injustice that we've witnessed in this country, and I just sort of see parallels in other sort of meetings I had. I remember as a state representative there was a conference where we were talking about poverty, and it was the poverty symposium actually. And we went into breakout groups, and I was in a breakout group where I was comfortable enough with everybody I was around, I knew them all, I was like, "Alright, now when was the last time any of you all ever lived in poverty?" And nobody was able to raise their hand. I was like, "Why are we here? You know, we are sitting here talking about poverty and all of these solutions and none of you all ever experienced poverty, at least in the last ten years, we're not going to find a solution here, so you guys well just might as well just jot our thoughts on papers, but that's all these are thoughts cause they're not experiences and if you don't have the experiences you aren't going to find a solution." And you know this can be applied to any topic, we always need to look around and see who is and who is not in the room. Not to say that these weren't very intelligent people, who've dedicated their lives to some really important work, I respect each and every one of them at the table, but and it's not to say that anybody should have been removed from the table, but the fact is more people should have been at the table.

And with that our task force recommended the creation of the Office of Environmental Justice, which seemed sort of radical to some people because environmental justice is somehow radical. But we're one of the only Midwest states, maybe Ohio and Indiana may be the only other two great lakes states, without an office of environmental justice. And this is an office that would be tasked with collaborating across state agencies and engaging with Black, Indigenous Nations, and communities of color, our low-income communities, our rural and farming communities, and our environmental justice advocates. And so, in order for us to design climate policies with at-risk communities in mind, again, we have to bring people into the conversation to talk about their personal lived experiences. And I can't stress enough the importance of not giving up, especially for those people who are being directly impacted, the people who aren't able to be with us in the room today, the people who are struggling day in and day out. And I hope that people will continue to push for environmental justice

and everything that it stands for because it is truly the way forward for us all. Whether you think you're impacted or not, I'll tell you—you are.

And I just want to thank Professor Klug again, I want to thank the Wisconsin International Law Journal for welcoming me today. And I cannot say enough that the time is long past that we make the necessary investments in clean energy to make this transition in an equitable way, to create jobs in communities that have lost them, and to create jobs in the communities that have been the most impacted by climate change, and also making sure that there is a just transition. One fortunate reality here is that there aren't a whole bunch of fossil fueled jobs, you know they're—people aren't mining coal here, we're not refining a whole bunch of oil, we're definitely not drilling for oil in Wisconsin, so we do have a—it won't be as hard of a transition as a West Virginia, or Kentucky, or Ohio, so we're fortunate in that way. But still, we have to take this seriously, we have to consider how every aspect of our lives is impacted by climate change and every industry has a role to play regardless of where your path in life takes you, there will be some sort of impact and we need to consider that as we move forward. And knowing that a clean energy future means endless opportunities for our states, means new business development, means new technology, it means job creation, it means a means to provide family supporting jobs to even more people around this state, it also means attracting and retaining talent. Also just means a brighter future for us all, a more comfortable, a more healthy place to live for everybody. I think that's what we all want, I don't think that's too much to ask for, and that reality is right in front of us, and we have to embrace it, but we also have to demand it from our leadership.

So, I'm proud of the work of the Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy. I'm absolutely waiting for that clean power plan to roll out in the near future, and I'm excited about the solutions in the task force report, and I'm excited about the things that it will do to make Wisconsin truly the best place to live, work, and to grow. But again, we can't do it without your participation, so I'm glad that you all are here today. I hope that you will take this outside when you leave here to other people, and you know, you don't have to be annoying about it, just talking to—you know, you don't want to turn people off, but I do hope that we continue to be able to speak about this from a way that considers the impacts on people's lives and also the impact on the future. And I'm proud of everything you all are doing and I am eager to push the state forward on the journey right

alongside you all, and as I mentioned, we can and must make Wisconsin a place where everybody can grow up, in a safe, in a clean environment, a place where everybody has an opportunity to thrive regardless of their zip code because all of this honestly ties directly into the Wisconsin idea—understanding that education should influence people’s lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom. And you all have the power to contact your elected officials, and they should respond, when they don’t respond that’s a problem. And you can also run for office too, which I want more people to consider, I want more young people to consider running for office, I want more environmental justice minded people, and justice minded people in general to run, to consider at least running for office because a lot of bad folks out there, a lot of bad actors, a lot of bad players, a lot of people who don’t want to see this reality and you’re the only thing in the way of that and you’re the only thing that can be—you are what can be the difference between what we have now, the direction we’ve been going, and not just a clean energy future but a more just and a more prosperous future for everybody. So, with that being said I want to thank you all again for having me. Really excited to have this conversation with you and I guess we’re going to go have a little Q and A. Alright, thanks so much!

