The Coal Miner's Son and Future Senator

Senator Byrd (D-W. Va.) has long by a mainstay of the coal industry. Actually, you could add the phrase “has long been” to almost any sentence about Byrd — he’s been around for a heck of a long time. After all, he’s served longer than any member of Congress in history. You might expect him to be a dinosaur, with views fossilized sometime around the same time that the coal beds of West Virginia formed. (OK, if you want to get technical the coal beds predate the dinosaurs, but you get the idea.) Metaphors aside, given his age and the importance of coal to his home state, you’d expect Byrd to be a stalwart opponent of mining regulation and climate change legislation.

Not so. TNR reports that Byrd is now abandoning the industry position on environmental issues, including mountaintop mining and climate change. In December he said that “The truth is that some form of climate legislation will likely become public policy because most American voters want a healthier environment.” In the same speech, he expressed serious doubt about mountaintop mining — partly for the reason (obvious enough once you think of it) that this method of mining cuts employment in the coal industry.

History is full of ironies. Who would have thought that the progressive voice in West Virginia would be a man who was once an Exalted Cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan? Of course, that was when he was only 24, which was almost 70 years ago — most of us can only hope to be granted that much time for our views to evolve.