Ernest Moniz: Long hair, not a hippie

And why should you care?

Moniz is a nuclear physics professor at MIT, the director of the MIT energy project, and at least according to a lot of reports, President Obama's first choice to head the Energy Department. Anything not to like about that?

Well, lots of environmentalists don't seem to. The Daily Beast reports that "environmental organizations are girding for a fight over a Moniz appointment. The objection seems to be that Moniz has in the past, advocated for hydraulic fracturing of natural gas and argued that natural gas is a bridge fuel to a low-carbon future. If that is truly the objection, then it is absurd. You know who else has advocated for increased use of natural gas? The Sierra Club. Now, the Club has changed its position and now strongly opposes both gas and fracking. But that doesn't mean it's right, and that doesn't mean that Moniz is wrong. There are indeed serious environmental concerns about fracking, most importantly 1) groundwater damage; 2) methane leakage; and 3) displacement of renewables instead of coal. But "concerns" does not equal "reason to reject fracking altogether." Instead, it suggests that we need a coherent regulatory plan, not outright rejection. (For the record, attacks on the Sierra Club for taking money from gas producers while advocating its use are, in my view, totally off-base. The Club believed at the time that increased gas production was good for the environment, and was happy to take money from those who would be benefitted by it. That's called coalition politics, and it's a good idea. When the Club changed its views, it stopped taking the money. As I recall, everyone knew about the gas industry/Sierra Club alliance. This is a non-story.).

Moreover, some reports suggest that the recent drop in US greenhouse gas emissions result from increased gas use, because it has caused a decline in coal burning. At least that's what the International Energy Agency believes. If that is accurate, then once again, simply advocating for natural gas and fracking does not in any way make someone anti-environmental. It makes then a pragmatist — maybe even an eco-pragmatist (right, Dan?).

If anything, the reason why Obama might lean toward Moniz is that the "United States Department of Energy" is something of a misnomer: the Department's largest responsibility lies in protecting the nation's nuclear warhead stockpile — a

task so thankless that the Department of Defense, which pretty much gets anything it wants, was able to slough it off on DOE when the new Department was created in 1977. DOE also sponsors research in the physical sciences, but unless there is a reason to believe that Moniz is hostile to renewables, this is not a concern, especially since the sequester and other Republican anti-science activities will its budget cupboard bare for the foreseeable future.

As a nuclear physicist, Moniz does like nuclear energy, but in fact seems more interested in using existing technologies rather than funding new ones. And if new investment in nuclear waste could actually reduce its potency, then that is something to favor, in my view.

I am quite skeptical that mainstream environmental organizations are really planning to fight this. They have bigger battles to wage, and the sourcing of the *Daily Beast* piece and similar articles is quite thin. Unless there is evidence of Moniz' hostility to renewables, this seems like the agitation of some extreme groups, not a genuine environmental concern.