Transcript: Jonathan Hecht. Incorruptible Massachusetts episode 4

Hi, this is Anna Callahan and you're listening to Incorruptible Massachusetts. Our goal is to help people understand state politics: we're investigating why it's so broken, imagining what we could have here in MA if we fixed it, and reporting on how you can get involved.

Today I'm interviewing Representative Jonathan Hecht.
Jon Hecht has been State Representative from Watertown and Cambridge since 2009. His current legislative priorities include climate change, transportation, and public health. He has been a leader in efforts to promote transparency in the legislative process and sponsored independent citizen review of major ballot questions in 2016 and 2018.

Rep Hecht has been a representative for ten years, so he has a very clear, insightful view on what is wrong in our State House and how that has changed over time. You'll hear him compare our current State House to what it was like 20 years ago (and that's somewhat horrifying!), and he also compares it to legislatures in other states. Spoiler alert — the concentration of power in the MA State House is, in his words, "beyond parallel." Rep Hecht is not only willing to disagree with the speaker, he's willing to talk about why it's so important for representatives to disagree with the speaker, and all of the mechanisms in use to prevent that healthy debate. It's a fascinating take from someone who has been leading the fight on these issues as well as on climate change for many years.

Without further ado, here is my interview with Rep Jonathan Hecht.

Anna Callahan:
Hi there. I am here today with Representative Jonathan Hecht, thank you so much for being with me.

Jonathan Hecht:
You're welcome. Thank you.

Anna Callahan:
It's really great to have all the, the progressive state representatives, here talking about state politics. And my first question for you is really about why state politics matters and why you personally are interested in state politics.

Jonathan Hecht:

State politics is really where it's at right now. We have so much opportunity to make a difference in people's lives. So many issues really turn on what states fund, what states tax, what states regulate, where states put their focus in terms of addressing problems that people are facing. And, we thought we were going to have a better partnership with the federal government, at least when I got started with this, about 10 years ago when President Obama was getting elected. We did have a good period in there when we were working closely with the federal government. That's gotten completely up-ended and now we're, now we're the front of the resistance. So I think the state, state government is really important in people's lives and in this political moment is especially important.

Anna Callahan:
Yeah. I'm just curious about what changed specifically in terms of the, more support from the federal government before 2016 and now?

Jonathan Hecht:
Oh, I mean everything. I mean, it, in trying to address issues across the board, whether it was healthcare, the environment, economic opportunity, reproductive rights, could go on and on and on. The administration, the Obama Administration and progressives in Massachusetts were pulling in the same direction, not necessarily with the same sense of urgency always. But of course, things in Washington changed radically after 2010 and then it's only gone downhill since. A little bit of light in this last election cycle, thank heavens, but what we, what we spent a lot of our time on in the last two and a half years has been trying to prevent damage in a lot of those areas that I just mentioned and in others. And also in trying to politically rally people to overturn this disastrous election in 2016 and get ourselves back on a better track.

Anna Callahan:
Wow. Do you, do you see, do you feel like your role as a state rep has changed in relationship with this whole relationship between the federal government changing?

Jonathan Hecht:
Well, I certainly can't expect to get much help out of out of the administration on the sorts of things that I care about. And I mean I've done a lot of work, for example, in the climate change area and particularly around transportation and transportation emissions. And you know, what's happening now with the federal government trying to, or at least the administration trying to roll back the cafe standards and now looking to overturn the California exemption on the clean air act is potentially disastrous. I mean, it would upset the sort of approach that we've taken in Massachusetts because we've been, we've been following the California lead and taking advantage of the California waiver. But it's not going to, the damage is not going to be limited to Massachusetts or even to this country. So I mean, that's an area where the states have to make sure that we do not allow that major rollback to occur.

Anna Callahan:

Yeah. And, and does it also give the states an opportunity maybe to lead on policy in a stronger way that maybe now that the federal government is sliding backwards, that we can really be those institutions that are pushing policy forward?

Jonathan Hecht:
Yeah. I mean, certainly we can be the standard bearers for a lot of these policies and within our own states we have some ability to keep things moving in the right direction or even accelerate that change. One thing we've been trying to do but it's difficult is work with other states. In the, in the climate area again you know, a number of us have been pushing and there is a process underway to develop a regional agreement on reduction of transportation related emissions. I think that is where we really need to be putting our efforts these days.

Anna Callahan:
Yeah. Are there certain policies that you are working on now that you feel like either aren't getting enough attention or maybe need more, need for people in the grassroots to know more about?

Jonathan Hecht:
Well I mean certainly again, I mean this, this transportation emissions area I think is hugely important. I think a lot of the environmental groups are aware of it and are at the table and are pushing, I'm not sure that I'm among the grassroots generally there's as much awareness or as much advocacy specifically around that issue, at about really thinking in a long-term way about how we're going to transform our transportation system to make it sustainable. And it's going to require some major changes in how we organize ourselves, how we build our, our living spaces, how we think about our work lives. It's gonna require a lot of investment. And so we have to figure out where that funding is gonna come from and how to do that in a way that's fair and sustainable and really addresses the problems. A lot those are going to take, those are going to be big, big, big political decisions. So getting the grassroots engaged in that is really vital.

Anna Callahan:
So this brings us to one of my favorite questions, which is, how do you, how do you get the grassroots engaged? How do you get people engaged in these kinds of issues? Either you specifically, I'd love to hear what you personally do, but also what is your, what is your idea about how you can get people to have their ideas represented?

Jonathan Hecht:
Well, yeah, I mean that's the sort of two different issues there, how to mobilize people in that, how to make that mobilization meaningful in terms of the actual decision making process. I feel like on the first there's a lot of energy and, and I don't find it you know, I, I get a lot of input from people in my district. I have a great active district that I interact with in a variety of ways that generates ideas and enthusiasm and activism. We have local 350 nodes in Watertown and in Cambridge, we have other citizen groups that have banded together to focus on the environment and climate change, and that have a focus on transportation as part of that.

Jonathan Hecht:
So I don't feel like there's so much an issue of generating grassroots activism around the issue. The challenge comes more in how you translate that into, into change through the law and policy making process. And that's where I think in Massachusetts we've got some big problems that it would be good to get the grassroots also focused on because it's not, it's not at the end of the day just about getting active. It's about making change. We have some pretty major obstacles I think institutionally to translating those voices on the ground into actual law and policy.

Anna Callahan:
Well that is what we are here to talk about. I would love to hear your thoughts about what, what's in the way, what is stopping us from affecting the changes that the people of Massachusetts want?

Jonathan Hecht:
I think it's concentration of power both in our society as reflected both, especially in, in economic power and how that translates into access and, and translates into access to decision makers. And then it's also the decision making institutions and processes themselves. And my focus is particularly on the house. We've got we've got a governor, we got a Senate and got executive agencies that are making decisions. We've got a court system. So there are a lot of different ways in which this, this political and and legal process plays out. In the house we have a, a particularly big challenge I think because over the last 30, 40 years what we've experienced out in society as a whole in terms of concentration of power has been paralleled by a process of concentration of power within that institution. And that's a very dangerous unholy potential alliance between a concentration of economic power and concentration of political power. And that's why I've been really pounding away and will continue to pound away at the issue of opening up the house and, and making it a place where all voices really can be meaningfully heard. Because I think in the absence of that, what tends to happen is that those who've got the money and the access get heard the most.

Anna Callahan:
Yeah. So I, I'd love to get some specifics about that. Because I think people from the outside are like, oh, there's a concentration of power in the house. What does that even mean? Right? Like you know, people vaguely hear that the Speaker has a lot of power, but what for example, would be some changes that you would want to make and why would those make a difference?

Jonathan Hecht:
Well it would, it would require a big change because over the course, as I said,of 30 or 40 years, we've gotten ourselves into a situation where you've got both rules and structures that concentrate power. And then you have a culture that's emerged around that that has accommodated itself to the reality of what day to day life for a representative in Massachusetts is like.

Anna Callahan:
Systems always reinforce themselves, right?

Jonathan Hecht:
Right. And then the culture and the system reinforce and, and it, it really is, would require a significant change both to the systems, to the rules and the practices, as well as in the mindset of, of the participants. So some of the, I think most striking things that you see in, in the house these days are the vast decrease in the amount of time that we actually spend convened as a house discussing and debating issues.

Jonathan Hecht:
So if you go back 30, 35 years, the house met much more frequently -- several times a week. Sessions were much more wide open in terms of participation, in terms of debate, in terms of amendments and votes on amendments and so on. In this last session, 2017-2018, I think the amount of time that we actually spent in session together was about a quarter of what it was 30 or 40 years ago. So there's just not as much back and forth among the representatives. And we're are the folks closest to the grassroots. Because we are the larger body where we're, we're, we're we represent smaller districts. So I think we're we're very in tune with what's going on in our districts. And what the people in our districts think.

Jonathan Hecht:
But unfortunately we don't really have as much opportunity to sit together and work together and hash through ideas and, and, and get sort of the benefit of the collective input of all of the members. Much of the work of legislating now takes place out of public view. When I, one of the sort of more telling things that I was told and have come to appreciate about how the house especially operates is that the legislative process works in two modes. Stop and go. What that means is we might have a hearing on a bill, people come in and testify. It's very lively, interesting. A lot of viewpoints are offered. Then things stop and then we don't hear much about how the bill is being developed, what sorts of ideas have been incorporated, what ideas have not been incorporated and why.

Jonathan Hecht:
And then, then at some point we get to go. The bill hits the floor. Oftentimes, oftentimes with changes with then very little opportunity for people who have not been a part of that process behind the scenes to understand how the bill got to where it is, who is involved in that. And then because of the, a lot of other tools that leadership has to move things once it decides to move them it just gets done. Unfortunately the result is that a lot of that real hashing out of, of issues that I think used to take place in a more open, more participatory fashion is now taking place in a more closed, closed-doors fashion. And, and you know, where it really worries me is, again who, who has been at the table while all those conversations have been going on. We don't really know.

Jonathan Hecht:
Sometimes that gets described... some of the people, including people in leadership like to describe that as law making by consensus here that there's been a lot of conversations and anybody who has a point of view on the bill could go into the speaker and talk to him and let him know what, what they think. My experience is that it doesn't really work that way. That law making by consensus, it's really law making by the connected -- law making by those who have access, both members as well as people outside the body. So I think that that, that raises, it should raise a lot of red flags. Both about what sort of influence is being brought to bear on the legislative process and the extent to which the final product really reflects the, the majority view.

Anna Callahan:
And so it sounds like from what you're saying that in these sort of stop periods or the, the dark periods, where we can't see what's happening, it's a combination of closed committees as well as in-person conversations that aren't, are completely, nobody even has any idea who's talking to whom. Is that accurate? And the committees don't have to, the committee votes don't have to be reported and they don't have to report what they've talked about. Is that accurate?

Jonathan Hecht:
The, the workings of the committees really depend a lot on how the chair chooses to approach it. Some chairs are very open to participation by the members, very good about sharing information, others are not. We don't have any standardized practice on that, which I think is, coming back to the systems and rules side of this, is something that ought to be addressed. But after things come out of committee oftentimes they will almost in every instance they would go to another committee, normally the ways and means committee or what's called the committee on bills in third reading. And those committees don't hold hearings. So their work, there's, there's, there's no mandated process by which they seek input. So how input works at that stage is really totally discretionary.

Jonathan Hecht:
And the committees, particularly ways and means, they have very large staffs that have a lot of expertise. They oftentimes will rework significantly a bill that's been worked on by a prior committee. But that, how that happens, again, is very non transparent. And then the speaker's office itself has a very large staff of, of policy people who are oftentimes engaged in that process as well. And what goes on in those conversations and who is present in those conversations is really very hard to say. And when they finish, that's, that's really the bill. Because the other thing that's happened historically is that the number of members who are willing to not just show deference to leadership and their, and their collective wisdom about how a piece of legislation should be drafted by voting against the bill has shrunk dramatically.

Jonathan Hecht:
So if you could go back again 20, 30 years, you don't even really have to go back quite that far, even 15, 20 years, you see that the number of Democrats, because Democrats have dominated the legislature for 70 years now, the number of Democrats who are willing to vote against their

own leadership on bills used to be anywhere from 20, 30, 35%. So there was a real active check on what leadership could move. In recent years that's fallen below 10%, even below 5%. So there's just not really the same willingness to stand up and say we're, we're, we're not with this.

Anna Callahan:
And that voting number is probably indicative of a whole bunch of other cultural things that are happening at the same time. Right? So if only 10% of people are willing to vote against leadership, then probably a similarly diminishing number of people are willing to in person say to the leadership, no, this is wrong. We should not be doing it this way, even in our private conversations. Do you think that's true? Is that the cultural part?

Jonathan Hecht:
You know, cause it's hard. It's hard. It's hard to know for sure because that's all, again, not transparent. Yeah, I think that there has been underlying a lot of this trend toward greater deference toward leadership there have been specific tools that leadership has, has obtained and has used with greater frequency to enforce its control. One has to do with the hierarchical structure of the house and the compensation structure in the house, which has become much more pronounced in terms of the, the way in which it allows leadership to you know, incentivize people to be good team players. Yes. that's the term that's often used.

Anna Callahan:
"Team players." Wow. What a, what an issue that I think average Massachusetts Bay staters do not know about. But that is probably gumming up everything that we're doing.

Jonathan Hecht:
Well, I think it's really ironic because as a, certainly as a, as a party, I'm talking about generally about Democrats, but particularly on the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. You know, I think we're, we're putting a lot of emphasis on bringing new voices to the table and making sure that the full range of real life experiences and backgrounds and so on is reflected in the political process. But unfortunately, again institutionally, particularly in the house, we have a lot of obstacles to making that something that really impacts the final products. And my hope is that the grassroots energy that we've seen in the last few election cycles around bringing new voices and new perspectives into the process will in time overcome the, the institutional obstacles and really open up the process in a meaningful way. Cause it's not enough to have people at the table. They have to be at the right table at the right time. And what they say at the table has to have, have real impact. And we're still a ways from that.

Anna Callahan:
So that kind of brings us to the larger question of theory of change. How do you, if it's going to change either the transparency or climate change legislation or rent control, whatever it is, social housing, whatever these things are that we, that we may need as a state...how are those big changes going to happen? What do you think is going to cause that?

Jonathan Hecht:
I think it's, it's really exactly what we're talking about. It's about opening up the political process, opening up the political institutions. So that the voices of those who are most impacted by these really major, major problems are heard. And I think you can't understate the importance of the institutional setting in which the political process plays out. So I'm encouraged again on the one hand that we are in the political process seeing the emergence of new political power. But we're going to have to figure out how we're gonna translate that into actual power in the halls of power.

Anna Callahan:
Are there, are there any other states that you look to for either particular legislation or for this kind of transparency and stuff like that?

Jonathan Hecht:
Yes. I think Massachusetts first of all is a real outlier in terms of the way that particularly the house operates. I mean, the degree of concentration of power I think in Massachusetts is perhaps without parallel. Certainly, I mean if you compare some of those things I was talking about in terms of the ability of people to act with autonomy, vote against leadership, I think Massachusetts is, or at least the house, is unusual. So whether we can exactly import what's happening in other states it's hard to say. I mean, I, I think there are some examples from other states that we could look to, but I think more than that, it's a matter of addressing some of the, some of the underlying structural problems that give rise to the limits on autonomy.

Jonathan Hecht:
In policy areas I certainly look at California as a leader in a lot of the climate area and have drawn on California law and California legislation for some of the work that I've been doing. And some of the other bills that I've worked on over the course of my time, we've certainly looked to Minnesota, we've looked to Vermont, we've looked a variety of other states depending on what the issue is. But at the end of the day, of course we have our own set of circumstances on our own political dynamics. So you can't just copy and paste. But you learn where you can.

Anna Callahan:
Yeah. Great. I I know part of what we're hoping to do with this whole podcast is just encourage people all across the state to consider running for state legislature. And so as part of that, I like to ask, what is it like to be a state rep? Like what is your, either a day in the life or like a week in the life or, how is it?

Jonathan Hecht:
It varies tremendously and it's, it's not all that predictable. Yesterday I was in three different committee hearings over the course of the day, three of the committees that I sit on held hearings. So it was a full day of hearing bills, hearing public testimony. Other days I'm more focused on some sort of district issue. On Friday for instance, I was out looking at a bike path that we're trying to build between Watertown and Cambridge that has some, has some flooding

problems. So we were meeting with residents and with some folks from DCR to try to address that. Over the next couple of weeks, I'm involved in some briefings that we're doing at the State House, one on zero emission vehicles. And then when we're in session in our legislative session, which is typically on Wednesdays, but not every Wednesday, unfortunately.

Anna Callahan:
Not even every Wednesday?

Jonathan Hecht:
No, not even every Wednesday, not by a long shot. That's a different type of day where we're oftentimes scrambling at the last minute to understand what, what, what bill's being put before us and trying to encourage changes to it, where, where we can though that's very difficult to do given the process that I was just talking about. So you have to be, you have to be quick on your feet, you move from one thing to a lot to another thing pretty frequently. But it's in, in, in, in that respect, you always you're always, you're always learning new things. You're always learning from constituents about things that are going on that make a difference. So you feel engaged certainly in, in that piece of the job. I would like to see more opportunities for particularly state reps to be more meaningfully engaged in the formal legislative piece where I think we've, we've been to some degree cut out of it. So it's an ever-changing set of issues and activities.

Anna Callahan:
Yeah. Sounds pretty interesting.

Jonathan Hecht:
It is, it is interesting.

Anna Callahan:
And I assume, have you been there for a while that you find it fulfilling?

Jonathan Hecht:
Yeah, I mean, it's, it's got its frustrations. I mean, as, as I've just been talking about. But it's, it is where we're working on these issues and we need people to be there with their energy and their, and their ideas and their pressure. And you know, people who have you know, that, that kind of passion. I mean, we need them.

Anna Callahan:
Yeah, we sure do. My last question is, what is your advice for people who want to run for office?

Jonathan Hecht:
Well, first of all, my advice is don't hesitate. The barriers are very, very low. I think particularly in a state rep race, it, I don't think you need to raise a lot of money. I don't think you need to, I don't think you need to be an in player. I think it's about organizing and about getting out and talking to people and running a good campaign. I don't think that there's any, any particular magic

magic formula to it. It's just the willingness to get out in your community and go knock on people's doors and hear what they're interested in and show that you're committed to working on the things that matter. And I think there's every reason to think that people who have that energy and that commitment and, and are organized can get there and can make a difference.

Anna Callahan:
Fantastic. Yeah. Thank you so much. It's been really wonderful being able to talk to you about this.

Jonathan Hecht:
You're welcome. Thank you for doing this.