

Comment for GTN Forum
“Climate Movement: What’s Next?”

Bill McKibben
Founder, 350.org
5/1/2019

The climate movement’s state-of-play

I came to climate activism gradually. In 1989, when my book *The End of Nature* was published, it was the first book on global warming for a general audience. For the next fifteen, I worked mainly as a writer and speaker. That’s because I was analyzing the problem incorrectly. In my estimation, we were arguing about the science of climate change: is it real, how bad is it, how bad will it become? Being a writer, and an academic, I thought the right response seemed clear: shed light on the issue through more books, more articles, and more symposia.

At a certain point, though, I began to realize that we weren’t engaged in an argument at all. The scientific debate had already been settled by about 1995, with the first major Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. The scientific community had reached a clear consensus, yet governments did not take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We were in a fight, not a discourse. Like most fights, it was about power and money. Another book or symposium was unlikely to move the needle.

On the other side of the fight stood the fossil fuel industry, with the richest—and hence most politically powerful—enterprises in human history. We weren’t going to match them dollar for dollar, or even penny for dollar. History indicates that in such unequal situations, the only option is to build a movement large enough to provide a countervailing force. It has happened before, such as with the movements for women’s suffrage, civil rights, and, most recently, marriage equality. Those were all hard fought, but a climate movement is harder because no one has made trillions of dollars being a bigot, but people do make trillions selling coal, oil and gas.

My expanded understanding prompted me to found 350.org, which initially consisted of myself and seven undergraduates. The biggest problem with climate change was that it seemed so

large—and we seemed so small next to it. It was hard to feel hope and easy to walk away. Nevertheless, each student took one of the seven continents, and we set out to organize. All over the world, we found people who wanted to act. Our first task was to show that there was a large constituency for action. So, in our first big action in 2008, we managed to coordinate 5,100 simultaneous demonstrations in 181 countries, which CNN called the most widespread day of political action in the planet's history.

We've gone on to organize about 20,000 such rallies, in every country but North Korea. 350.org is still, I believe, the largest group that works solely on climate change, with a not-so-large staff of 120 spread around the world. On the ground, we have found a huge if diffuse movement, made up mostly of indigenous and other frontline communities bearing the brunt of fossil fuel industry. Much of our work is thus focused on coordinating the multitude of worthy efforts already underway.

Given the urgency of the climate crisis, we also quickly saw the need to move beyond education to confrontation—hence, in the US, the birth of the continent-wide Keystone pipeline fight. There was already a movement in place in the tar sands of Alberta and on the prairies of Nebraska through which the proposed pipeline would pass. But we nationalized the movement, with demonstrations in DC and pressure on President Barack Obama. So far, the pipeline remains unbuilt. Every project like this around the world (e.g., fracking wells, coal ports, LNG terminals) is a target for opposition. We may not always win, but we always make life harder for the industry.

On another front, we realized that, to be successful, we needed to systematically confront the instruments used to sustain the dominance of fossil fuels. Thus, we launched the divestment movement in 2012 with the goal of reducing the financing for and, more importantly, social acceptance of the extraction of fossil fuels. It has grown much faster than we expected, and it is now the largest anti-corporate campaign of its kind in history, with commitments from endowments and other portfolios worth about \$8 trillion. Goldman Sachs said recently that the campaign is the main contributor to driving the prices of coal shares down sixty percent, and Shell said it had become a “material risk” to its business.

In retrospect, I think the most important development in this movement has been the strong emergence of a “climate justice” focus, uniting the climate fight with the broader fight for human rights and dignity. There are so many great leaders now leading the struggle that I don’t want to list any for fear of leaving many out. But for the last five years, my job has been to move into the background as much as possible, seeking to highlight the work of others.

Looking ahead, the biggest challenge facing the movement remains the strength of the opposition. With unlimited cash, it has managed to dominate politics, especially in the US. The Koch Brothers are two of the biggest political donors, as well as the biggest oil and gas barons and biggest leaseholders in the tar sands. Give them, and the larger industry, credit: they have managed to make US the only country on earth not taking part in the Paris Agreement, abandoning the international coordination of emission reductions. They even got the US to backtrack on something as obvious and simple as automobile fuel efficiency standards.

I do think that, in the long run, they will lose. The science gets stronger with each passing week, and every hurricane and fire makes the issue more salient—and more urgent—for more people. The newest polling shows that climate is much higher on the list of items that Americans worry about and vote on than it used to be, and that trend will continue given the inexorable impacts of our changing climate.

Seventy-five years from now, we will run the world on sun and wind because they’re free. These new technologies, whose prices have plummeted in the last decade, excite everyone. Polling shows that the political left, right, and center all love photovoltaics.

Still, the “long run” remains the problem. I worry that we can’t make change happen fast enough. If we continue on the current trajectory, the planet that in seventy-five years runs on sun and wind will be a broken one. The strategy of the industry is to extend its business model another decade or two, even at the cost of breaking the planet. They want to make the transition untraumatic for themselves, even if it is traumatic for all life on earth.

Going forward, the movement needs to grow bigger and stronger. The strength of movements is a direct reflection of how many people are involved. And a movement must be bigger than the sum of its constituent organizations. We need a combination of breadth organizing and depth organizing. The first are the broad, low-barrier-to-entry, consciousness-raising efforts—think about the student Climate Strikes now underway thanks to the inspiration of Sweden’s Greta Thunberg. The second are the grittier, detailed efforts to get particular policies adopted—say, the state-by-state and city-by-city fight for renewable portfolio standards that specify minimum levels of energy production from wind, solar, biomass, and geothermal. And the third is an overarching framework to inspire action: for example, the incredibly exciting fight for a Green New Deal now being debated in US political circles and other countries. Together, these three components are the foundation for a bigger, stronger movement.

“System change, not climate change”?

I am not great with eschatology; I don’t know the final destination. While I don’t know how to change the “system,” the urgent nature of the climate crisis doesn’t let us simply put off action. The biophysics doesn’t allow it.

That said, progress on the climate fight in its own right can help drive systemic change. Think about who dominates the prevailing political-economic system. So many of the major players have gained their power by controlling the scarce, geographically concentrated supplies of fossil fuel—players like Vladimir Putin, the Koch brothers, the Saudi royal family, and Exxon. If we replace fossil fuels with sun and wind, the effect will inevitably lead to at least some erosion of the current power structure. In general, to achieve the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy, decentralized and local is where we need to be headed.

Going forward, we must fight for the changes we know we need to make for a livable planet and, at the same time, make the world a fairer place. Some of this is inherent. Because sun and wind are intrinsically local, for instance, they reduce some of the power imbalances inherent in an economy based on who controls the small patches of ground above oil and gas. There will be solar billionaires, I imagine, but there won’t be solar Koch Brothers or solar Saudi royal families,

because the diffuse nature of non-fossil fuels tends to disperse rather than concentrate economic power. But enabling such a shift requires an intentional strategy to structure renewable energy so that its ownership and control is as local as possible. That was the particular genius of Germany's Energiewende law, which proposes a plan to democratize energy supply in the transition to a low-carbon, reliable, and affordable energy system.

The climate crisis could be the lever for other kinds of transformative change. Again, look at the discourse around the Green New Deal, which reflects a deep policy shift in the direction of fairness and equity. Like the New Deal of the 1930s, this proposal would be an economy-wide mobilization in the direction of greater justice, with the "green" part a reference to the fact that our main goal is not ending an economic depression but the full-scale decarbonization of the economy in light of the climate crisis. Such synergy between social and environmental issues holds great potential.

Do we need a meta-movement?

The climate threat is so pressing and so intermingled with current economic arrangements, that it provides the best possible lever for making profound change in other aspects of the economy such as rampant inequality, as Naomi Klein articulates so well in her book *This Changes Everything*.

Social movements across diverse issues are inherently linked because they share a common critique of the status quo, whether you call it neoliberalism, predatory capitalism, or simply capitalism. All kinds of collaboration, both philosophic and strategic, are possible. Look, for instance, at the crucial role of indigenous groups and the indigenous rights movement. Shunted off to what we once thought were valueless wastelands, these communities often live atop fossil fuel resources or astride the transportation routes needed for pipelines and other infrastructure. As such, they are natural allies in the fight against climate change. Indeed they are important leaders in the fight, and they bring a worldview that challenges the status quo with enormous clout.

Fighting for their human and legal rights often means complicating the lives of the fossil fuel industry. Specifically, it is crucial that the worldviews associated with indigenous peoples, human rights advocates, and other movements are recognized for their close alignment with the scientific data pertaining to the climate crisis. The oldest and newest wisdom traditions on the planet are powerfully synching up while casting considerable doubt on the conventional wisdoms—extraction, accumulation, commodification—that have dominated our economic and political world.

For another example, look at the potential alliance between climate and anti-war movements, driven by the realization that most conflict in this century is going to be driven by climate disruption. Indeed, it already is: a severe drought in Syria, for instance, helped touch off years of deadly civil war. More broadly, climate disruption is widely recognized as the biggest obstacle to realizing the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including the reduction of poverty and inequality. In the last couple of years, hunger and child labor are both on the increase again, thanks to warming-caused disasters. All these conditions point to opportunities for alliance building across movements to accelerate transformational change.

I have never been a Pollyanna. The cheerful title of my first book, after all, was *The End of Nature*. And its thirty-year sequel, out this spring, is *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?* But I do sense that, at a moment when the climate emergency has become obvious and pressing, we might begin to pivot. If we do, we could progress very far very fast, especially if the climate movement forges alliances with other movements. The extremely rapid fall in the price of renewable energy and electric storage is one indication that the necessary conditions for rapid change are now in place.

We are not going to stop climate change—that is no longer on the menu. Standing on the Greenland ice shelf last summer and seeing it melting was sobering. We're now playing for whether warming is going to reach 2, 3 or 4 °C, with the latter appearing increasingly likely. That range of temperature rise means we still can decide to sustain a livable civilization. But the window for survival is closing fast.

We must use this moment as crucial leverage to push the planet in a new direction. Let us try. If we succeed, then we have risen to the greatest crisis humans have ever faced and shown that the big brain was a useful evolutionary adaptation. If we fail—well, we better to go down trying.