

THREE STEPS TO ESTABLISHING A POLITICS OF GLOBAL WARMING

BILL MCKIBBEN

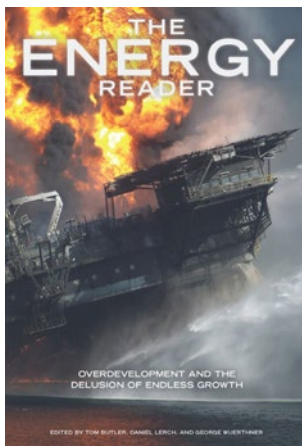


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BILL MCKIBBEN is the author of a dozen books about the environment, including *The End of Nature* (1989), the first book for a general audience on climate change, and *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (2010). He is a founder of the grassroots climate campaign 350.org, which has coordinated 15,000 rallies in 189 countries since 2009. A scholar-in-residence at Middlebury College, he holds honorary degrees from a dozen colleges and is a fellow of Post Carbon Institute. In 2011 he was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

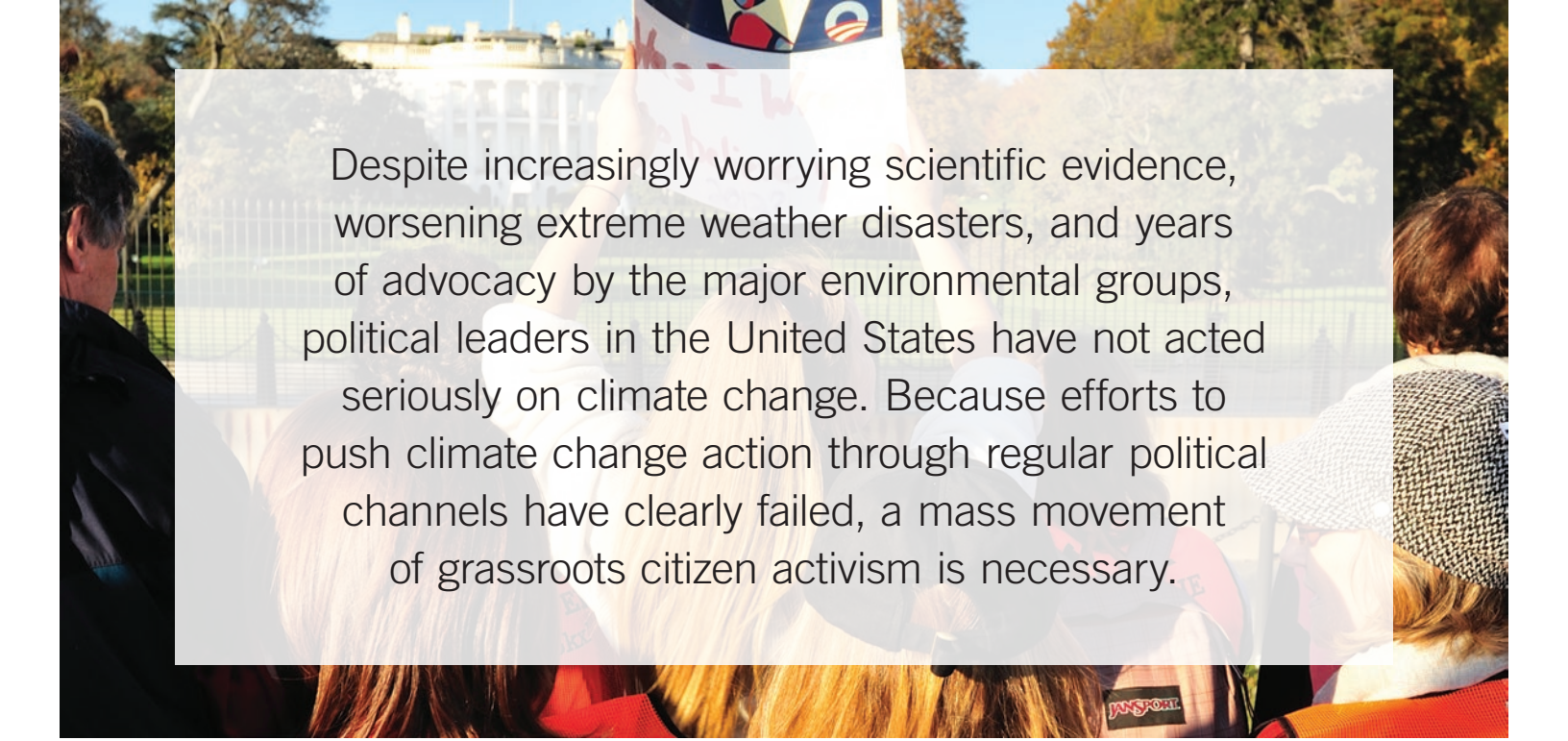
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Photo: Mark Schmerling. *Clean-energy advocates organized by 350.org and other groups ring the White House to oppose the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline.*



Despite increasingly worrying scientific evidence, worsening extreme weather disasters, and years of advocacy by the major environmental groups, political leaders in the United States have not acted seriously on climate change. Because efforts to push climate change action through regular political channels have clearly failed, a mass movement of grassroots citizen activism is necessary.

TRY TO FIT THESE FACTS TOGETHER:

- In early 2009, southeastern Australia experienced the most extreme heat wave in its recorded history; later that year, a dust storm over 2,000 miles long blanketed most of the country's east coast, choking major cities in a red haze.
- In 2010, a “staggering” new study from Canadian researchers showed that warmer seawater has reduced phytoplankton, the base of the marine food chain, by 40 percent since 1950.¹ Also in 2010, carbon dioxide emissions made the biggest one-year jump ever recorded (5.9 percent) and pushed atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations to 389.6 parts per million, the highest level in the last eight hundred thousand years.
- In 2011, the United States saw 14 “billion-dollar” extreme weather events, more than ever before, causing more than 600 deaths and over \$52 billion in damage. Among the worst were a devastating drought and wildfires in Texas, flooding from Hurricane Irene in the Northeast, major flooding in the Midwest and along the Mississippi River, and six different multiday tornado outbreaks in the Midwest and Southeast.

And during all this time, our leaders did exactly nothing about climate change. The 2009 U.N. Climate Change

Conference in Copenhagen turned out to be an elaborate sham: We discovered afterwards that negotiators knew their proposed emissions cuts were nowhere near good enough to meet their own remarkably weak target for limiting global warming. In 2010, Democratic Senate majority leader Harry Reid decided not even to schedule a vote on legislation that would have capped carbon emissions. And in 2011, the presidential campaign started off with the major Republican candidates falling over each other to proclaim their disbelief in human-caused climate change.

I wrote the first book for a general audience on global warming back in 1989, and I've spent more than two decades working on the issue. I'm a mild-mannered guy, a Methodist Sunday School teacher. Not quick to anger. So what I want to say is this: *The time has come to get mad, and then to get busy.*

For many years, the lobbying fight for climate legislation on Capitol Hill has been led by a collection of the most corporate and moderate environmental groups. We owe them a great debt, and not just for their hard work. We owe them a debt because they did everything the way you're supposed to: they wore nice clothes, lobbied tirelessly, and compromised at every turn.

By the time they were done, they had a bill that only capped carbon emissions from electric utilities

(not factories or cars) and was so laden with gifts for industry that if you listened closely you could actually hear the oinking. They bent over backwards like Soviet gymnasts. Senator John Kerry, the legislator they worked most closely with, issued this rallying cry as the final negotiations began: “We believe we have compromised significantly, and we’re prepared to compromise further.”

And even that was not enough. They were left out to dry by everyone—not just Reid, not just the Republicans. Even President Obama wouldn’t lend a hand, investing not a penny of his political capital in the fight.

The result: total defeat, no moral victories.

So now we know what we didn’t before: Making nice doesn’t work. It was worth a try, and I’m completely serious when I say I’m grateful they made the effort, but it didn’t even come close to working. So we better try something else.

Step one involves actually talking about global warming. For years now, the accepted wisdom in the best green circles was: talk about anything else—energy independence, oil security, beating the Chinese to renewable technology. I was at a session convened by the White House early in the Obama administration where some polling guru solemnly explained that “green jobs” polled better than “cutting carbon.”

No, really? In the end, though, all these focus-group favorites are secondary. The task at hand is keeping the planet from melting. We need everyone—beginning with the president—to start explaining that basic fact at every turn.

It is the heat, and also the humidity. Since warm air holds more water than cold, the atmosphere is about 5 percent moister than it was forty years ago, which explains the freak downpours that seem to happen someplace on this continent every few days.

It is the carbon—that’s why the seas are turning acid, a point Obama could have made with ease while standing

on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. “It’s bad that it’s black out there,” he might have said, “but even if that oil had made it safely ashore and been burned in our cars, it would still be wrecking the oceans.” Energy independence is nice, but you need a livable planet to be energy independent on.

Mysteriously enough, this seems to be a particularly hard point for smart people to grasp. Even in the wake of the disastrous Senate non-vote, a climate expert from one of the big green groups told *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman, “We have to take climate change out of the atmosphere, bring it down to earth, and show how it matters in people’s everyday lives.”² Translation: ordinary average people can’t possibly recognize the real stakes here, so let’s put it in language they can understand, which is about their most immediate interests. It’s both untrue, as I’ll show below, and incredibly patronizing. It is, however, exactly what we’ve been doing for a decade and clearly, It Does Not Work.

Step two, we have to ask for what we actually need, not what we calculate we might possibly be able to get. If we’re going to slow global warming in the very short time available to us, then we don’t actually need an incredibly complicated legislative scheme that gives door prizes to every interested industry and turns the whole operation over to Goldman Sachs to run.³ We need a stiff price on carbon, set by the scientific understanding that we can’t still be burning black rocks a couple of decades hence. That undoubtedly means upending the future business plans of ExxonMobil and BP, Peabody Coal and Duke Energy, not to speak of everyone else who’s made a fortune by treating the atmosphere as an open sewer for the by-products of their main business.

Instead they should pay through the nose for that sewer, and here’s the crucial thing: *most of the money raised in the process should be returned directly to American pockets.* The monthly check sent to Americans would help fortify us against the rise in energy costs, and we’d still be getting the price signal at the pump to stop driving that SUV and start insulating the house. We also need to make real federal investments in energy research and

development, to help drive down the price of alternatives—the Breakthrough Institute points out, quite rightly, that we’re crazy to spend more of our tax dollars on research into new drone aircraft and Mars orbiters than we do on solar photovoltaics.⁴

Yes, these things are politically hard, but they’re not impossible. A politician who really cared could certainly use, say, the platform offered by the White House to sell a plan that taxed BP and actually gave the money to ordinary Americans.

Asking for what you need doesn’t mean you’ll get all of it. Compromise still happens. But as David Brower, the greatest environmentalist of the late twentieth century, explained amid the fight to save the Grand Canyon: “We are to hold fast to what we believe is right, fight for it, and find allies and adduce all possible arguments for our cause. If we cannot find enough vigor in us or them to win, then let someone else propose the compromise. We thereupon work hard to coax it our way. We become a nucleus around which the strongest force can build and function.”⁵

Which leads to the third step in this process. If we’re going to get any of this done, we’re going to need a movement, the one thing we haven’t had. For twenty years environmentalists have operated on the notion that we’d get action if we simply had scientists explain to politicians and CEOs that our current ways were ending the Holocene, the current geological epoch.⁶ That turns out, quite conclusively, not to work. We need to be able to explain that their current ways will end something they actually care about, i.e., their careers. And since we’ll never have the cash to compete with ExxonMobil, we better work in the currencies we can muster: bodies, spirit, passion.

As Tom Friedman put it in a strong column the day after the Senate punt, the problem was that the public “never got mobilized.”⁷ Is it possible to get people out in the streets demanding action about climate change? In 2009, with almost no money, our scruffy little outfit, 350.org, managed to organize what *Foreign Policy* called the “largest ever coordinated global rally of any kind”

on any issue—5,200 demonstrations in 181 countries, 2,000 of them in the U.S.A.⁸

People were rallying not just about climate change, but around a remarkably wonky scientific data point, 350 parts per million carbon dioxide, which NASA’s James Hansen and his colleagues have demonstrated is the most we can have in the atmosphere if we want a planet “similar to the one on which civilization developed and to which life on earth is adapted.”⁹ Which, come to think of it, we do. And the “we,” in this case, was not rich white folks. If you look at the 25,000 pictures in our Flickr account,¹⁰ you’ll see that most of these citizens were poor, black, brown, Asian, and young—because that’s what most of the world is. No need for vice presidents of big conservation groups to patronize them: shrimpers in Louisiana and women in burqas and priests in Orthodox churches and slum dwellers in Mombasa turned out to be completely capable of understanding the threat to the future.

Those demonstrations were just a start (one we should have made long ago). We followed up in October 2010—on 10-10-10—with a Global Work Party. All around the country and the world people put up solar panels and dug community gardens and laid out bike paths. Not because we can stop climate change one bike path at a time, but because we need to make a sharp political point to our leaders: We’re getting to work, what about you? We need to shame them, starting now. And we need everyone working together.

This movement is starting to emerge on many fronts, beginning with grassroots citizen opposition to mountaintop-removal coal mining, new coal plants, the shale gas drilling boom, and the unlocking of Canada’s tar sands. In 2008, a young man named Tim DeChristopher tried to keep treasured public lands out of the hands of energy developers (and that underground carbon out of the atmosphere) at a rushed BLM gas-and-oil lease auction in the waning days of the Bush Administration. Tim posed as a bidder, won 14 parcels, and got ten years in prison for his efforts—but barely two months later new Interior Secretary Ken Salazar canceled most of the auction’s sales.

In 2011, tens of thousands of people across the continent rallied to stop Keystone XL, a massive new pipeline meant to bring nearly 1 million barrels of tar sands oil daily from Canada to refineries and ports in the United States. We marched, lobbied, even circled the White House with our bodies, and over 1,000 of us were arrested—but President Obama ultimately sent the project back for more review (a modest but real victory).

The big environmental groups are starting to wake up, too. They did amazing work on the Keystone campaign, rallying people for unconventional action and working easily and powerfully with the grass roots—groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council, Friends of the Earth, the Sierra Club, and the National Wildlife Federation were out in front, aggressive, impassioned. Churches are getting involved, as well as mosques and synagogues. Kids are leading the fight,¹¹ all over the world—they have to live on this planet for another seventy years or so, and they have every right to be pissed off.

But, it won't work overnight. We're not going to get Congress to act next week, or maybe even next year. It took a decade after the Montgomery bus boycott to get the Voting Rights Act. But if there hadn't been a movement, then the Voting Rights Act would have passed in ... never. We may need to get arrested again. We definitely need art, and music, and disciplined, non-violent, but very real anger.

Mostly, we need to tell the truth, resolutely and constantly. Fossil fuel is wrecking the one Earth we've got. It's not going to go away because we ask politely. If we want a world that works, we're going to have to raise our voices.

ENDNOTES

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- 9 James Hansen et al., “Target Atmospheric CO₂: Where Should Humanity Aim?” *Open Atmos. Sci. J.* 2 (2008), 217–231.
- 10 350.org’s Flickr page, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/350org/sets/>.
- 11 See <http://energyactioncoalition.org/>.

