



Time For Outrage On Behalf of the Planet

It's Time to Fight the Status Quo

Published on Thursday, June 7, 2012

by [Bill McKibben](#)

My solution is: get outraged.

Having written the first book about global warming 23 long years ago, I've watched the issue unfold across decades, continents, and ideologies. I've come to earth summits and conferences of the parties from Rio to Kyoto to Copenhagen, and many places in between.

All along, two things have been clear.

One, the scientists who warned us about climate change were absolutely correct—their only mistake, common among scientists, was in being too conservative. So far we've raised the temperature of the earth about one degree Celsius, and two decades ago it was hard to believe this would be enough to cause huge damage. But it was. We've clearly come out of the Holocene and into something else. Forty percent of the summer sea ice in the Arctic is gone; the ocean is 30 percent more acidic. There's nothing theoretical about any of this any more. Since warm air holds more water vapor than cold, the atmosphere is about 4 percent wetter than it used to be, which has loaded the dice for drought and flood. In my home country, 2011 smashed the record for multibillion-dollar weather disasters—and we were hit nowhere near as badly as some. Thailand's record flooding late in the year did damage equivalent to 18 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). That's almost unbelievable. But it's not just scientists who have been warning us. Insurance companies—the people in our economy who we ask to analyze risk—have been bellowing in their quiet, actuarial way for years. Here's Munich Re, the world's largest insurer, in their 2010 annual report: “The reinsurer has built up the world's most comprehensive natural catastrophe database, which shows a marked increase in the number of weather-related events. For instance, globally, loss-related floods have more than tripled since 1980, and windstorm natural catastrophes more than doubled, with particularly heavy losses from Atlantic hurricanes. This rise cannot be explained without global warming.”

Two, we have much of the technological know-how we need to make the leap past fossil fuel. Munich Re again: “Whilst climate change cannot be stopped, it can be kept within manageable proportions, thus avoiding the possibility that climate change tipping points will be reached.”

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What does this mean in practice? Go to China where, yes, they're emulating the West by putting up lots of coal-fired power plants. But they're also busy building, say, solar hot-water heaters: 60 million arrays, providing hot water for 250 million Chinese, almost a quarter of the country—compared with less than 1 percent in America. I could list here a long tally of solutions (wind, geothermal, conservation, bicycles, trains, hybrid cars, tidal power, local food) and I could list an equally long tally of policies that everyone knows would help bring them quickly to pass: most

important, of course, putting a stiff price on carbon to reflect the damage it does to the environment. That price signal would put markets to work in a serious way. It wouldn't guarantee that we could head off climate change, because we've waited a very long time to get started, but it's clearly our best chance.

So, if we have an emergency, and we have the tools to fight it, the only question is why we're not doing so. And the answer, I think, is clear: it's in the interest of some of the most powerful players on earth to prolong the status quo. Some of those players are countries, the ones with huge fossil-fuel reserves: [recent research](#) has demonstrated that the nations with the most coal, gas, and oil are the most recalcitrant in international negotiations. And some of those players are companies: the fossil fuel industry is the most profitable enterprise in history, and it has proven more than willing to use its financial clout to block political action in the capitals that count.

If we are going to impose a stiff-enough price on carbon to keep those reserves in the ground (which we simply must do—physics and chemistry don't allow us any other out) then we have to overcome the resistance of those companies and countries. We can't outspend them, so we have to find different currencies in which to work: creativity, spirit, and passion. In other words, we have to build movements—creative, hopeful movements that can summon our love for the planet, but also angry, realistic movements willing to point out the ultimate rip-off under way, as a tiny number of people enrich themselves at the expense not only of the rest of us, but also at the expense of every generation yet to come, not to mention every other species.

As it happens, such movements are possible. We built one in the last year around the Keystone Pipeline, which would have run from the tar sands of Canada down to the Gulf of Mexico. The pipeline was a certifiably bad idea—burning the world's tar sands alone would raise the planet's temperature almost a half degree Celsius. (Burning all the coal will add, wait for it, 15 degrees.) And so people came together in huge numbers—we had the largest civil disobedience action in America in 30 years with 1,253 people arrested. We ringed the White House with people standing shoulder-to-shoulder, five deep. We inundated the Senate with 800,000 messages in 24 hours, the most concentrated burst of environmental activity in many years. And it kind of worked—though the battle rages on, the president at least decided to deny the permit for the pipeline.

Our campaign preceded, and then was dwarfed by, the wonderful Occupy movement, which raised specific issues, like the Keystone Pipeline, but mostly concentrated on larger questions of fairness. It showed a great depth of concern about inequality and corporate power, the very set of arrangements that have produced climate change. And it offered a number of solutions—getting money out of politics, above all—that would really help.

But talking endlessly about these solutions at international conferences is not going to produce them. They go against the power of the status quo, and hence they will be enacted only if we build movements strong enough to force them. We need politicians more afraid of voter outrage than they are of corporate retribution. And so—at 350.org, and many other places—we'll go on trying to build that movement. We'll focus on pipelines and coal mines, and on subsidies to the fossil fuel industry. We'll demand fee-and-dividend systems that tax fossil fuel and give the proceeds to citizens. We'll write and march and, when necessary, we'll go to jail. And we need those who spend too much of their time at international conclaves to join us, when you can. We'll never get the solutions we need—the solutions everyone has known about for two decades—unless we build the movement first.

Bill McKibben is Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College and co-founder of 350.org. His most recent book is [Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet](#).