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Vangelism

Q&A with Van Jones about the Climate Security Act and green jobs

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What does the green jobs and justice community think about the Lieberman-Warner [Climate Security Act](#)? To get one perspective, Grist caught up with [Van Jones](#), the founder of [Green For All](#), a group that promotes green-jobs policies and environmental justice. Jones, a civil-rights lawyer and the founder and former executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, has become a leading voice for building a green economy.



Van Jones.

Green for All pushes for federal action to build an inclusive green economy. Would Lieberman-Warner do that?

Lieberman-Warner is a good step in the right direction. I think most of us like it, but we don't love it yet.

Here's the good thing about Lieberman-Warner: It would put \$60 billion toward green-collar job training, and that's very important, to make sure our community colleges, our tribal colleges, our historically black colleges and universities, our labor unions have the money they need to train people to make this transition [to a green economy] work.

How would you like to see the legislation improved?

I still think that the emissions-reduction targets are too low, and I think there are some assumptions in Lieberman-Warner that radically underestimate the ingenuity, innovation, and inventiveness of the American people. I just think it's too cautious. And at the end of the day, you're saying to 2,100 companies, "Cut your emissions by 2 percent per year." We're not a 2 percent country. That's not who we are. Raising the standards, raising the ambition, will pull so much innovation and entrepreneurship out of the country that it literally will be like a green economic renaissance for the country. I think that there's this fear that if you raise the standards too much, you're going to hurt the economy. I think actually it's when you raise the standards that you help the economy, because you unleash the innovation to beat global warming and kick-start the economy.

How do you foresee federal climate legislation affecting the growth of green jobs?

Smart, sane climate policy would be an economic stimulus package on Wheaties and steroids. If we do this the right way, we're going to create literally millions of green-collar jobs. Smart, sane climate policy is key to creating a green economy that includes everyone.

Green for All is part of the coalition promoting a [new report](#) that came out this week on green jobs. What does that new study show us about the potential for growth in this area?

It shows that there's a lot of potential for growth, but also that there's a lot of existing occupations that will be green. Here's a problem I'm starting to see: When people think about the green economy,

they think about this sort of Buck Rogers technology stuff that's way out there in the future somewhere, where people are flying around with jet packs and propellers on their heads. The kind of technology that we're talking about is caulk guns, machinists, that kind of stuff. These are American jobs that can be upgraded to green.

I know some in the environmental-justice community are against a cap-and-trade system, worrying that it will push more pollution into their communities. Environmental-justice groups in California, where you live, issued a [blanket statement](#) against cap-and-trade. Is this a concern for you guys, who are part of that community as well as the green jobs community?

We aren't prepared at this point to take anything off the table in terms of what the right mix of solutions will be. There may be some market-based solutions. There might be some regulatory solutions. There may be some solutions we haven't thought of before. We want what we call "cap, collect, and invest" to be the main policy here. We want a cap on carbon. We think it's a human-rights issue to cap carbon. Then we say collect. We think that polluters ought to pay. I think America's energy companies should be respected; they've powered America to this point, and we have to be appreciative of what they've done. At the same time, they've benefited year after year for decades now from millions of dollars in subsidies. It's time now for us to say to them that the gravy train is over, and they should then be proud to pay back to this country some of what the country has invested in them by buying their pollution permits and not begging for freebies.

Of course, the environmental-justice communities are concerned because they've always borne the brunt of environmental degradation, but they've never gotten any of the benefits of the green economy. Are there ways you see that we can improve Lieberman-Warner to avoid that?

Lieberman-Warner isn't going to pass anyway, so I think the most important thing is to win the debate on the values that a clean and green economy should include everybody, it should be an equal-opportunity economy, and we need to minimize the pain for low-income people, vulnerable people, and we need to maximize the gain. We've got to win the debate about the basic value set. And once we've won the debate about the basic value set, then we can use that to evaluate whether cap-and-trade is the right set, or cap-and-auction, cap-and-dividend, carbon taxes, carbon tariffs. Before you can win those debates, sometimes you have to have the prior debate, which is do we even care about having an equal-opportunity green economy? Will we accept eco-apartheid as a country?

As you said, not many people think we're going to see this bill passed this year. If that's true, what's the ideal outcome of this debate right now? What do we achieve this year?

Hopefully, Barbara Boxer [chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and floor manager for the Climate Security Act] emerges as the hero that she is for even taking on this crazy Senate. Everybody wants to give Barbara Boxer a hard time, and I want to vomit every time I hear this. It's easy to grandstand, but to get something done you've gotta get 60 votes. It's the heaviest lift in U.S. politics to get over a filibuster. My hope is that we don't spend a lot of time sacking our own quarterback as environmentalists, and that she comes out of it rewarded for at least trying.

The other thing is I think we need to have it out with the doomsayers who are using economic scare tactics to say that we can't do anything about carbon. This is our opportunity over the next couple of weeks to make our own argument, that this isn't something we're going to do *to* the economy, it's something we're going to do *for* the economy.

If we do those two things, block for our quarterback, make sure she gets through this respected and stronger and smarter, and use the economy to push back on the can't-do crowd that has hijacked this debate, then we'll have done a good job. We're going to have to save the National Association of

Manufacturers from itself. The National Association of Manufacturers is out there screaming that if we have good climate policy, American businesses are going to suffer. We've been losing manufacturing jobs for decades now. Sane climate policy is the only way you're going to get manufacturing jobs back in the United States. Somebody's got to make all these wind turbines and fabricate all these solar panels.

For more from Van Jones, check out [this video](#).

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