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Working Together for a Green New Deal

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My background is in the struggles for racial justice and criminal justice reform. As such, I've always felt an affinity for Cinque, the hero of the slave-revolt movie *Amistad*. In that film, based on a true story, the righteous, enslaved Africans fight back and take over the slave ship.

The people at the bottom rise up--taking their destiny into their own hands. It's really a metaphor for the last century's version of racial politics. The slave ship is earth, the white slavers are the world's oppressors and the African captives are the world's oppressed. The point is for the oppressed to confront and defeat their oppressors. I took that as my mission and spent years fighting against superjails, rogue cops, the prison lobby--against the forces that, to my mind and the minds of many, are the slavers of today. Yet at a certain point it occurred to me that what we need is less investment in the fight *against* and more energy in the fight *for*: for positive alternatives to violence and incarceration. It was around that time that I got involved in the environmental movement. And I came to understand that the answer to our social, economic and ecological crises can be one and the same: a green economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty.

Society faces some huge challenges. The individuals, entrepreneurs and community leaders who will step up to make the repairs and changes are going to need help. They require and deserve a world-class partner in our government. The time has come for a public-private community partnership to fix this country and put it back to work. In the framework of a Green New Deal, the government would become a powerful partner to the problem solvers of the world--and not the problem makers.

Now, we cannot achieve the goal of a Green New Deal just by wishing for it. The first step in getting the government to support an inclusive, green economy is to build a durable political coalition.

On the one hand, there are large and powerful constituencies of white, affluent, college-educated progressives active in the United States. They are passionate about the environment, fair trade, economic justice and global peace. Unfortunately, many do not yet work in concert with people of color in their own country to pursue this agenda; they champion "alternative economic development strategies" across the globe, but not across town. These people could be great allies in uplifting our inner cities if they are given encouragement and a clear opportunity to do so.

On the other hand, many groups of people of color do not want to work in coalition with majority white organizations and white leaders. Many fear betrayal; others resent chronic white arrogance. Cultural differences and power imbalances create tensions; some organizations are actually committed to a racially exclusive ideology. Even though such organizations could benefit from additional allies and outside assistance, the very folks who could most benefit from a green opportunity agenda are loath to get

involved.

Taken together, this means that the various US social change movements today are still nearly as racially segregated as the rest of society. This is a moral tragedy. And it is a tremendous barrier to building sufficient power to advance a positive social change agenda for anyone and everyone. Breaking through this standoff is a critical first step toward building a New Deal coalition for the new century--which would be the only thing dynamic, diverse and powerful enough to overcome the obstacles to progress.

In the New Deal period, it was a broad electoral coalition that moved the government onto the side of ordinary people, not FDR alone. Farmers, workers, ethnic minorities, students, intellectuals, progressive bankers and forward-thinking business leaders all joined forces at the ballot box to support FDR and his Congressional backers as they worked to revive the economy.

To accomplish our tasks today, we need a similar force: an electoral New Deal coalition for our time. Let's call it the Green Growth Alliance. Such an alliance would be a broad effort fusing wise, compassionate forces in civil society with the enlightened self-interest of the rising green business community.

On the civil society side, five main partners should make up the Green Growth Alliance:

§ *Labor*. Organized labor has been in steep decline over the past few decades, but it remains the best and most stalwart defender of working people's interests--in the workplace and beyond. Policies that lead to the retrofitting and green rebuilding of the nation will give unions a tremendous opportunity to expand and diversify their ranks. If the unions and green business leaders can identify win-win compromises on wages and other issues, they can work together to pass legislation that will help both sides.

§ *Social justice activists*. Legions of people have committed themselves to the ideal of opportunity for all. Advocates for economic justice, civil rights, immigrants' rights, women's rights, disability rights, gay rights, veterans' rights and other causes should seize the opportunity to ensure that the new, green economy has the principles of diversity and inclusion baked in from the beginning.

§ *Environmentalists*. With their large organizations, broad networks, Beltway savvy and large budgets, the mainstream environmental organizations have tremendous assets to bring to bear in the effort to green the country. Now they have a chance to turn the page on decades of perceived elitism by working as better collaborators with other sectors of society. An exchange of knowledge, experience and even personnel between the mainstream environmentalists and social justice groups would be healthy and invigorating for everyone.

§ *Students*. Students' energy and enthusiasm have already turned up the heat in the movement to prevent catastrophic climate change. Just a few years ago, it was considered outlandish for anyone to call for an aggressive target like an 80 percent reduction in carbon emissions by the year 2050. But youth-centered efforts like Step It Up, Focus the Nation and the Energy Action Coalition have already made "80 by '50" a mainstream demand--accepted by presidential candidates and even energy-company CEOs. As more racially diverse groups like the League of Young Voters, the Hip Hop Caucus, the Environmental Justice and Climate Change Initiative and Young People For (YP4) join the movement, the sky is the limit for the next generation's leadership role.

§ *Faith organizations*. The moral framework suggested by the three principles of social-uplift environmentalism (equal protection, equal opportunity and reverence for all creation) should attract faith leaders and congregants. Many are looking for alternatives to the divisive fundamentalism that has

taken up a great deal of airtime lately. The idea of "creation care" is a positive alternative frame that can help faith communities move into action as part of the Green Growth Alliance.

These five forces, in alliance with green business, can change the face of politics in this country. Their goal would be straightforward: to win government policy that promotes the interests of green capital and green technology over the interests of gray capital (extractive industries, fossil-fuel companies) in a way that spreads the benefits as widely as possible. The idea would be to resolve the economic, ecological and social crises on terms that maximally favor green capital and ordinary people.

Fortunately, the Green Growth Alliance is not just a theoretical necessity. It is already becoming a practical reality. National organizations like the Apollo Alliance and the Blue Green Alliance have come on the scene, promoting good jobs in the clean-energy sector. The Apollo Alliance includes labor unions, environmental organizations, community-based groups and businesses; the Blue Green Alliance is a partnership of the Sierra Club and the United Steelworkers, recently joined by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Communications Workers.

Former Vice President Al Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection is also reaching out broadly to engage new sectors in the battle to avert catastrophic climate change. And the new kids on the block--Sky and Green for All--are engaging important constituencies like PTA moms and African-American ministers.

Despite these developments, the notion that a politics centered on green solutions could build a muscular governing majority in the United States still seems doubtful. That is because the "green movement" seems to be the cushy home of such a thin and unrepresentative slice of the public.

The fact is, when many ordinary people hear the term "green," they still automatically think the message is probably for a fancy, elite set--not for themselves. And as long as that remains true, the green movement will remain too anemic politically and too alien culturally to rescue the country.

Enlightened, affluent people who embrace green values do a great deal of good for the country and the earth--and they are making an important difference every day. But nobody should make the mistake of believing that a small circle of highly educated, upper-income enviros can unite America and lead it all by themselves. Eco-elite politics can't even unite California.

If you doubt me, let's examine a recent statewide election in California to see how eco-elitism can actually set back environmental initiatives--even very thoughtful and well-financed ones, even in places where the overall support for environmentalism is relatively high. Everyone loves to praise GOP Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger for signing global-warming legislation in 2006. Yet few discuss the fact that just a few months later, the majority of California voters rejected a clean-energy ballot measure called Proposition 87.

This defeat holds many lessons for us going forward. The idea for Prop 87 was brilliant in its simplicity: California would start taxing the oil and gas that oil companies extract from our soil and shores. This state-level oil tax would generate immense revenues that would go into a huge "clean-energy" research and technology fund--totaling \$4 billion over ten years.

At first, the measure was polling off the charts. Victory seemed certain. But in the end, Californians rejected the measure, 55 percent to 45 percent. Why? Mainly because Big Oil convinced ordinary Californians that the price tag would be too high for them to bear. The oil and gas industry spent \$95 million warning that the tax would be passed along to consumers. It suggested that the tax would push

gas and home-energy costs through the roof and hurt the poorest Californians. And in the end, the biggest clean-energy ballot measure in the country went down.

The defeat of Prop 87 should sound a clear warning for all of us as we work to birth a green, postcarbon economy. We must recognize and celebrate the fact that well-off champions of the environment will be indispensable to any coalition effort. In fact, it is their business smarts, monetary resources, social standing and political savvy that have propelled the green wave to this point. But at the same time, the eco-elite cannot win major change alone. After all, if a Prop 87-style collapse is possible in the Golden State, what do you think will happen in the other forty-nine?

To change our laws and culture, the green movement must attract and include the majority of all people, not just the majority of affluent people. The time has come to move beyond eco-elitism to eco-populism. Eco-populism would always foreground those green solutions that can improve ordinary people's standard of living--and decrease their cost of living.

But bringing people of different races and classes and backgrounds together under a single banner is tougher than it sounds. I have been trying to bridge this divide for nearly a decade. And I learned a few things along the way.

What I found is that leaders from impoverished areas like Oakland, California, tended to focus on three areas: social justice, political solutions and social change. They cared primarily about "the people." They focused their efforts on fixing schools, improving healthcare, defending civil rights and reducing the prison population. Their "social change" work involved lobbying, campaigning and protesting. They were wary of businesses; instead, they turned to the political system and government to help solve the problems of the community.

The leaders I met from affluent places like Marin County (just north of San Francisco), San Francisco and Silicon Valley had what seemed to be the opposite approach. Their three focus areas were ecology, business solutions and "inner change." They were champions of "the planet"--rainforests and important species like whales and polar bears. Many were dedicated to inner-change work, including meditation and yoga. And they put a great deal of stress on making wise, earth-honoring consumer choices. In fact, many were either green entrepreneurs or investors in eco-friendly businesses.

Every effort I made to get the two groups together initially was a disaster--sometimes ending in tears, anger and slammed doors. Trying to make sense of the differences, I wrote out three binaries on a napkin:

1. Ecology vs. Social Justice
2. Business Solutions (Entrepreneurship) vs. Political Solutions (Activism)
3. Spiritual/Inner Change vs. Social/Outer Change

People on both sides of the equation tended to think that their preferences precluded any serious consideration of the options presented on the opposite side.

Increasingly, I saw the value and importance of both approaches. I thought, What would we have if we replaced those "versus" symbols with "plus" signs? What if we built a movement at the intersection of the ecology and social justice movements, of entrepreneurship and activism, of inner change and social change? What if we didn't just have hybrid cars--what if we had a hybrid movement?

To return to the metaphor of the slave ship Amistad, the question in my mind has become, What if those

rebel Africans, while still in chains, had looked out and noticed the name of their ship was not the Amistad but the Titanic? How would that fact have affected their mission? What would change if they knew the entire ship was imperiled, that everyone on it--the slavers and enslaved--could all die if the ship continued on its course, unchanged?

The rebels suddenly would have had a very different set of leadership challenges. They would have had the obligation not just to liberate the captives but also to save the entire ship. In fact, the hero would be the one who found a way to save everyone on board--including the slavers. And the urgency of freeing the captives would have been that much greater--because the smarts and the effort of everyone would have been needed to save everyone.

For the sake of the ship--our planet--and all aboard it, the effort to go green must be all hands on deck.

We can take the unfinished business of America on questions of inclusion and equal opportunity and combine it with the new business of building a green economy, thereby healing the country on two fronts and redeeming the soul of the nation. We must.

About Van Jones

Van Jones is the founder and president of Green for All. [more...](#)

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