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[Terrence McNally](#)

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Q&A with Green Collar Economy Author Van Jones

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VAN JONES received the \$100,000 2008 Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship in New York City December 8th. Hamilton Fish, President of The Nation Institute, said, "In a year of change, Van Jones offers an integrated, progressive blueprint that simultaneously promotes jobs, environmental stewardship, and economic progress. He has arrived to pull us back from the brink."

The economy is in crisis. Unemployment is rising. Families are hurting. Despite recent drops in oil prices, the days of cheap gas and oil are numbered. Climate change calls for massive changes in the way we supply and use energy. VAN JONES believes that these crises are connected and that together they present an enormous opportunity. JONES is the founder and president of GREEN FOR ALL and author of THE GREEN COLLAR ECONOMY.

A report recently released by the U.S. Conference of Mayors says that we can create over 4 million green jobs if we aggressively shift away from traditional fossil fuels toward alternative energy and a significant improvement in energy efficiency.

Another report from the Political Economy Research Institute and the Center for American Progress shows that investing \$100 billion in a green economic recovery plan can create two million jobs over two years - four times more jobs than spending the same amount of money within the oil industry.

Green For All and its partners are proposing a Clean Energy Corps that includes a revolving loan fund to finance the ambitious retrofitting of the nation's building stock. An investment of less than \$3 billion per year would provide financing and can be expected to create close to 120,000 green jobs a year and 600,000 over five years, while also lowering home heating and electricity bills for homeowners and small businesses.

VAN JONES is also co-founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and Color of Change, both committed to equal justice and opportunity for low-income people and people of color. Van has earned many other honors, including the 1998 Reebok International Human Rights Award; the International Ashoka Fellowship; selection as a World Economic Forum "Young Global Leader;" the Rockefeller Foundation "Next Generation Leadership" Fellowship; and Campaign for America's Future "Paul Wellstone Award 2008." A Senior Fellow with Center for American Progress, his first book, THE GREEN COLLAR ECONOMY is a New York Times best-seller.

McNally:

You've followed an interesting path. How did you end up doing the work you're doing today?

Jones:

I got out of law school and moved to the Bay Area for love. It lasted about three weeks, then I had to find something to do with my time. I was a 24-year-old African-American male with dreadlocks and a law degree. So it was pretty obvious that I needed to take on police brutality and the criminal justice system. I did it with fervor, helping to build the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Bay Area Police Watch, Books Not Bars and other groups. But I really burned out -- just too many funerals, too many bad court cases, too many frustrating meetings with the activist world.

Trying to get my health together, I ventured across the Bay to Marin County, where I discovered salads and tofu and hybrid cars and solar panels -- healthy green good stuff that wasn't in Oakland or Bayview Point. I realized there was going to be a huge shift in the economy toward clean energy, poison-free food

and all that -- and I wanted to make sure we did not have eco-apartheid, some communities being ecological haves and some being ecological have-nots.

In 2001, I came up with the slogan "Green Jobs, Not Jail" back and started going around trying to get people to look at the green economy as the next source of civil rights. I talked about equal protection from the pollution poison-based economy and global warming, but also equal opportunity and equal access to the best of the green solutions.

Solar panels don't put themselves up. So let's make sure that people who need jobs can get jobs and entrepreneurial, ownership and inventor opportunities in solving these problems to fight pollution and poverty at the same time.

McNally:

So you've been working on these issues for years. You started an organization, you wrote a book. Now how does the global financial crisis impact the possible success of your vision?

Jones:

Well, it makes it that much more urgent and, frankly, that much more doable. Now I think that this economic breakdown is awful and tragic -- and inevitable. We got sold a bill of goods for the past 30 years. Can't dump it all on George Bush. Both political parties said we could run the U.S. economy on consumption, not production; on debt and credit cards, not thrift and smart savings like our grandparents, on environmental destruction not environmental restoration. Well, that -- by definition -- is an unsustainable pathway. It had to come to an end.

Now we're going to have to find a new way to power the U.S. economy. Let's stop relying on overseas credit, let's start relying on our own creativity. Let's stop borrowing from overseas, let's start building here again. And let's move forward.

The smartest thing that we can do at this point is to rely on some good old green Keynesian-ism. We need to engage in some government deficit spending to get us through this recession, but let's not do the kind of stupid stimulus we did over the summer: We passed out checks to everybody so they could run down to Wal-Mart and buy a flat screen TV -- building the economy in China but not here.

Let's instead use that money to invest in greening our infrastructure. Millions of jobs retrofitting millions of buildings, putting up millions of solar panels, creating wind farms, fixing our power grid. These kinds of things will cut carbon, cut energy prices, make us more self-sufficient with regards to energy, bring our home values up through weatherization, and create jobs. We can cut a green New Deal to get us through this recession - frankly, depression - the same way we used the old New Deal to get us through the last one.

McNally:

The book THE GREEN COLLAR ECONOMY was a bestseller the week it came out...

Jones:

Let me tell you why. I think it's very important. We didn't have a huge advertising budget, I wasn't on the Oprah Winfrey Show, I didn't buy infomercials. We sent out emails to activist organizations, to our friends, to students that I've been privileged to speak to. And they sent out an email saying, "Hey we've got a book coming out. If this book gets on the New York Times bestseller list, it will be the first book EVER by an African-American about the environment or about energy to make the New York Times bestseller list."

Ordinary folks, good activists all around the country said, "We're going to make this happen. We're going to shatter the emerald ceiling of publishing, and get an African-American environmental writer on the New York Times."

Literally millions of emails wound up getting sent out from many organizations, and it's a huge accomplishment for this movement. It shows that there's an invisible network of networks that's already in position to support the next Congressman or the next President who takes bold action. A network that will lift up literature can lift up laws and lawmakers. And that's what this book indicates.

McNally:

I'm reminded of Paul Hawken's book BLESSED UNREST, in which he writes about an enormous movement that hasn't yet recognized its power.

Jones:

Paul Hawken is one of my mentors, and his organization was the fiscal sponsor for Green For All. He pointed out before anybody else that there is a movement bigger than any movement that we've ever seen before. It doesn't have a name, it doesn't have one leader. It's a network of networks. Well, we proved that movement is strong enough to catapult an unknown first time author, a black guy with a very strange book, to the middle of the New York Times bestseller list. That is just the beginning. Wait until next year when this movement actually picks up the U.S. government and puts it down on the side of the people.

McNally:

As you point out, Congress passed the initial stimulus package -- the rebate checks, then they passed the Wall Street bailout. Now it looks like there'll be an infrastructure stimulus, a jobs program. Have you or any of your allies been involved in those discussions -- with the goal of not only making sure this happens, but that it's green?

Jones:

Absolutely. That's why I've got these bags under my eyes. I'm so proud to be a senior fellow with the Center for American Progress, and I encourage everybody to download the Green Recovery Report from their website.

The reality is that for \$100 billion -- a teeny weenie modest investment compared to the trillion dollars we just came up with for the banks -- we can create two million jobs in the next two years. When you're losing 100,000 jobs here and 50,000 jobs there, you can start putting the brake on by creating new jobs. And these are not Buck Rogers jobs. These are not sci-fi, George Jetson jobs nobody's ever heard of. Imagine Joe Six-Pack with a green hardhat on and work boots going out to retrofit America. We're talking about hand drills and caulk guns.

McNally:

I've heard you say, "Put down the hand gun and pick up the caulking gun."

Jones:

Exactly. We've got to give people different icons. This is not your grandma in the environmental movement. God bless her and God bless that. This is about sleeves rolled-up, dirt under the fingernails, Rosie the Riveter -- not making tanks to fight wars, but making wind turbines and solar panels to avoid wars. Putting the country back to work, retrofitting and re-powering this country so that we have a clean energy grid, so we connect our clean energy power centers.

We have a Saudi Arabia of wind in the middle of our country in the plain states. We've got a Saudi Arabia of solar in the sun-belt. The problem is we don't have a way to connect our clean energy power centers to our population centers. That should be the big project over the next ten years: to build a clean energy digitized smart grid to get clean energy electrons from our power centers to our population centers.

People can then retrofit their cars, plug them in, and we'll be running the country off of wind, sunlight, geothermal. The country that does that first will have the strongest economy in the world, and lead the way to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It's a full employment program like you've never heard of. You've

got to retrofit literally every building in this country. You could put everybody to work with hammers and nails and clean green insulation. There is a way out of this recession. There's a way to beat global warming. There's a way to beat poverty. And it's called a Green New Deal.

McNally:

The components for turbines might be built elsewhere. But when you talk about retrofitting every building in this country, that work cannot be outsourced.

Jones:

You put the solar panels on top, you blow in that green insulation, you replace those old inefficient boilers with new ones, you double pane that glass. That's skilled labor, that's union jobs, that's pathways out of poverty.

Sure, but how are you going to pay for it? We can't afford it. We're broke.

We can't afford not to do it. With most buildings, the energy savings will pay for itself in two to four years. This is not only revenue neutral, it's revenue positive.

And guess what? Those dirty plants that go overtime in the summer, overtime in the winter, also contribute to asthma. Now you're saving on asthma inhalers for children, you're saving on health bills -- and you're cutting global warming.

I don't want to be Pollyanna, but it looks to me like a win/win/win solution. It gets the economy going, it gets us out of some of these oil wars. Maybe then we could bring home some of the troops who are fighting in Iraq and policing oil lines all over the world.

We can have peace on earth when we have peace with the earth. And that requires that we work together to design and build more clean and green agricultural, energy and water systems in this country.

McNally:

That sounds a few "wins" short to me. You've got outsourcing, poverty, energy, climate change, national security...

Jones:

It's good to have a green economy with no throwaway species or throwaway resources, but we should also have no throwaway children or neighborhoods or nations or people. That is how we'll actually get the movement we've always wanted and the country we've always wanted -- through the door of the green economy.

We're going to have to break up with oil. We'll have to break up with coal. When we break up with those two huge things, we may as well go ahead and break up with racism and discrimination. We may as well build a green economy that Dr. King would be proud of. Your grandma's not making it, your dad's not making it. It's us.

We're going to create in our lifetimes a green economy powered by clean energy, smarter on water, smarter on materials, and supportive of less poison on the agricultural side.

We're going to create that, so why not create it with our values of equal opportunity and inclusion and anti-poverty and social uplift baked in from the very beginning?

Our fundamental belief has to be that we are all in this together. Re-powering this country is going to require an all-hands-on-deck. The U.S. can't be the world leader in the green economy while California is spending a dime out of every dollar to be the world leader in the gulag economy. We've got to move forward together.

McNally:

It's a huge vision, but it's made up of many little things that make sense. Let me turn to the recent presidential election. Can you say a few words about how you felt when Barack Obama was declared president?

Jones:

I was proud. The world was proud. It was the first good news we have had in a very long time. You have to remember, just a month or so prior, we suffered this tremendous economic and financial breakdown. The floor disappeared underneath our feet. The financial meltdown scared the country and scared the world. Then along comes Barack Obama, and his victory gives us this tremendous political and cultural breakthrough.

The ceiling disappeared over our head. That inspired the world. So now we have no floor. But we have no ceiling either. It is up to us to either fall or to fly. I believe we will fly.

Senator Obama had the nomination wrapped up for months. So when he walked out on stage the first African-American to accept the nomination of his party, I expected to watch and analyze --and instead I found myself in tears. To hear him say that it doesn't erase the past, and it doesn't fix the present, but it means the future might be different.

Now he's elected. We've celebrated. We have to accept responsibility for the first time in my lifetime. It's not enough to win on election day. We've got to win every day for the next four years, the next eight years, the next 16 years.

The president cannot fix everything. In fact, I don't even want a president to try to fix everything, I just want a president that's going to stop breaking everything! Then let us begin to fix it.

There's a danger that we will say, "What is Barack Obama going to do?" My hope is that we can look at Barack Obama and say, "Well he did his part. Now what are we going to do together?"

There should be an engagement dividend. In 2008 the American people finally woke up. More people watched the Vice-Presidential debate than were watching American Idol. That's never happened. You go to barbershops now and people are talking about dividends and derivatives. Topics matter, the economy matters, people are asking tough questions.

The pay-off for having people participate in discussions, debates, and elections, should be that we have a real democracy in this country for the first time, at least in my lifetime. Barack Obama's election doesn't substitute for that. It opens the door to that for the rest of us.

McNally:

To refer back to the New Deal... Franklin Roosevelt ran on a fairly moderate platform. It was only after he won the election that the people, a national movement of labor unions and farmers and so on, descended on Washington and held his feet to the fire. We never did that to Bill Clinton. He was allowed to triangulate because the people sat back and weren't a force for accountability.

Jones:

I'm taking it one step further. On the left to hold a guy accountable often means we're going to protest, we're going to cuss him accountable, we're going

to kick him accountable. I think we actually need to hold him and keep him accountable.

McNally:
Embrace him accountable...

Jones:
Exactly. And that requires understanding that the logic of the presidency is to disappoint the right constituencies in the right order so that he can be re-elected. That's his job.

It's our job to make sure that our constituencies are not first in line for disappointment. And we do that by not pushing him around, but by pulling the country forward -- by doing things at a local level.

If Congress wants to debate climate endlessly, let's keep charging ahead at the city level and creating green jobs. If Congress won't do it, let's use our utilities to come up with creative ways to finance the retrofits. Let's create lists. If we insist that our local schools have 25% local organic foods that creates an instant market locally for organic foods.

McNally:
Does Obama's being president change your mission or your approach to accomplishing it?

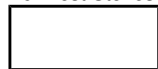
Jones:
It lets me know that everything we are dreaming about and working toward is that much more possible. Brother President is saying that energy is his number one priority, besides stabilizing the financial markets. He has promised five million green jobs in his first term. I am going to do everything I can to help him deliver on that promise.

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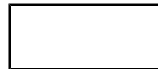
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