



Van Jones: Why I'm Going to Washington

By Doug Pibel, YES! Magazine

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Doug Pibel: There were rumors over the weekend that you were going to Washington to become another Czar. What is the actual job title?

Van Jones: Well, there's no such thing as a Green Jobs Czar. I'm just going to be a special advisor at the White House Council on Environmental Quality. My role will be to help to shape policy to get as many jobs and as much justice as we can out of the climate and energy proposals coming from the administration

Doug: You've had a lot of success working from the outside building a grassroots movement. What do you think you can do from within the administration that you couldn't do from the outside?

Van: We have a president who's committed to climate solutions and who's also committed to economic recovery and who has a longstanding commitment to civil rights and equal opportunity. You put those three things together and I think that this administration's going to do an extraordinary job, and I think it's also important that people who have a grassroots perspective on some of these things have the opportunity to serve and to support what the president is trying to do. And so to me that's the main thing. We've got a president like this who's trying to do what he's trying to do, it's important that everybody step up in all the ways that they can.

Doug: What happens to Green for All while you're in DC?

Van: That's the best news of all, that we have an extraordinary leader in Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins, who's coming on board. Anybody in California knows that she is a true wunderkind. She has been a phenomenal leader of the progressive labor movement, she's African-American, she's young -- in her early thirties. You just could not dream up a better person to come into Green for All at this time. She has led the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council, which has a huge influence on the city council down there and they've done everything from expanding health care to improving living wages twice. She is somebody who understands the nuts and bolts of moving Green for All from inspiration to implementation. The nuts and bolts on the ground, producing real jobs, making sure that economic justice prevails even as we green the economy. That's not just for speechmaking. That's serious policy-making at the local level. That's community economic development, workforce development, project labor agreements, community benefits agreements -- she's done all that work and been extremely successful getting real economic improvements to real people in the real world. So for her to come in at this time when our mission at Green for All has changed because the situation has changed -- there are billions of dollars for a green recovery -- the question is how do we get them implemented on the ground. For her to be able to come in, take her expertise,

use that expertise to move Green for All to the next level is the big miracle. My opportunity to go and to help the administration on the inside is probably the smaller miracle. To have an African-American woman with her kind of credentials joining this green jobs fight is just extraordinary.

Doug: The last time YES! readers heard from you was in an interview right after the election. In that interview you said that you had no intention of going to work for the Obama administration. What changed your mind?

Van: Not only did I say I had no intention of going, when they asked the question, I burst out laughing because at the time it seemed completely ludicrous that it would even be an option. I think what changed my mind was interacting with the administration during the transition process and during the whole process of getting the recovery package pulled together. I began to see that there was an important role at the table, inside the process, to do make sure all the great things the president wants to do can get done well. But the real miracle was Phaedra. Having done such an extraordinary job in San Jose and California, Phaedra was ready to graduate to a national role, wanted to stay in the Bay Area. In talking to her, I realized that she really was the person who we needed to move Green for All to the next level, as we go from a kind of start-up operation to an enduring institution. That's what she's been able to do in other roles. Once you begin to see that you're not indispensable -- in fact somebody can probably do your job better than you -- then your mind kind of opens up to other possibilities. I couldn't be prouder to be laying my sword on the table along with everybody else in the Obama Love Army, and I'm excited about it.

Doug: In your November interview, you pointed to the experience of Nelson Mandela and the ANC as a cautionary tale for movement people thinking about going into government. Why is your situation different?

Van: I think that certainly is a big cautionary tale. When Nelson Mandela came out and the ANC took over, people left the townships and went into parliament and the movement politics and the township politics really suffered. I think that it had a negative impact. You know, the overwhelming rush from the townships into parliament, I think had a negative impact on the ability of the ANC to govern well. The reality is that the grassroots movement in this country is not shrinking, it's expanding. People got a taste of engagement. People are actually looking for new ways to get involved -- the Obama organization is still active, Green for All is growing, and other organizations are growing. So my initial concerns -- again, this is before Obama was even sworn in -- that we would stop, that somehow the grassroots movement would stop -- those concerns are not strong for me. 70,000 people were marching in New York City last week. 12,000 students went to the Power Shift conference, there was a major civil disobedience action -- or planned civil disobedience action -- that resulted in a huge change. You know, there's all kinds of great stuff that's happening across the country, so I'm not as concerned about the grassroots movements sputtering out. And that also creates more options.

Doug: While you're in DC, what can folks who have been following Green for All and working with you or on your initiatives, what can folks do to keep the movement going?

Van: Continue doing the things we have planned. We're working to implement the

green recovery in a just way. We need to get those recovery dollars out fast and fair. Anybody who's interested can go to the website greenforall.org and you'll see lots of opportunities to get involved and also lots of information about how to get those recovery dollars working in your own community. And that's going to be an important part of what Green for All does going forward. To tell you the truth, I think in that start-up phase the early phase, visioning and initiating, I think I did an extraordinary job. We are in a different world, and Green for All needs a different leader. And it has that leader in Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins.

Doug: You have two young sons. How does your family feel about moving across the country?

Van: They're on board. They're excited. It's always a big effort, but they're excited, and I'm excited too.

***Doug Pibel's** interview with **Van Jones** was conducted March 10, 2009, on the day Van was announced as special advisor at the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Van's earlier interview for YES! appeared in **Food for Everyone**, the Spring 2009 issue of YES! Magazine. Doug is managing editor at YES! Magazine. Van is a YES! contributing editor and author of the New York Times best seller, The Green Collar Economy (HarperOne, 2008).*

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