



## Bill McKibben: How to Get Obama and Congress to Do the Right Thing on Climate Change

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Author Bill McKibben first warned about global warming and its implications for the planet in his 1989 book, *The End of Nature*. But in the last few years, it has become the focus of his work as an organizer of [350.org](http://350.org), an advocacy organization promoting global action to tackle climate change.

In an interview with Roger Cohn, McKibben described why he is working fulltime on the issue, why he thinks a citizens movement is essential for giving President Obama the "political space" necessary to address climate change, why a "cap-and-dividend" system might offer the most potential, and why he believes the jury is still out on whether the most serious impacts of climate change can be avoided. "For the moment, I am not spending my time being either optimistic or pessimistic," he said. "I am just working."

**Roger Cohn: Until relatively recently you were well-known primarily through your writing on environmental issues, but in the last few years you've become equally well-known as an activist on the issue of climate change and raising public awareness of it. How did this come about, and why have you been doing this?**

Bill McKibben: At a certain point, I just decided that after 16 or 17 years of speaking and writing, that we weren't getting anything done, that I needed to do more. I told the story the other day at the [Yale] Divinity School of coming back from Bangladesh -- where I had dengue fever and watched lots and lots and lots of people die of dengue and climate-caused disease spreading rapidly through Dhaka for the first time when I was there -- and I just felt like I wanted and needed to do more.

And looking around, I was struck by the fact that we never really had a movement about climate. We had all the superstructure of a movement. We had great, inspirational leaders like Al Gore, and we had economists, and engineers, and policy people, and scientists, obviously. But the part of the movement we didn't have was the movement part. And we started trying to build that in a small way with this sort of impulsive walk we did across Vermont, which turned out to be highly successful.

**RC: And when was that?**

BM: It was the fall of 2006. Labor Day, 2006. We walked for five days, across much of Vermont. We got to Burlington, about a thousand of us marching by the time we got there. People sleeping in fields. And we got all the candidates for Congress and the Senate in Vermont, including the conservative Republicans, to sign onto this pledge that they would support cutting carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050 if

they were elected. It was extremely successful. Quite, quite powerful. And it made us wonder why there wasn't more of this going on.

So we tried to see if we could figure out how to do it on a larger scale. And when I say we, I mean, me and six undergraduates at Middlebury College. We launched a website in January of 2007. We had no real money, and certainly no organization or anything. We started sending out emails to people asking them to help, and people in organizations all across the country said they would. And, in April of 2007, three months later, we posted 1,400 simultaneous demonstrations across the country, in all 50 states. Some people called it the biggest day of grassroots environmental action since the first Earth Day.

Within days, both [Hillary] Clinton and Obama had endorsed our position of 80 percent cuts by 2050, and Obama and congressional legislation now take that as one of their often-repeated targets. That was a number that was far too radical for anyone to talk about publicly in D.C. just two years ago.

**RC: Right.**

BM: So we were feeling very good about ourselves, and even a little bit smug. And then in the summer of 2007 the Arctic melted very quickly. And it forced us to understand that we hadn't asked for enough -- that the science was getting darker, and that we would need a global response.

We needed to try to take this movement as global as we could, which was a pretty ludicrous idea. But we had one major advantage. In January of 2008, [NASA scientist] Jim Hansen gave us the number we needed to work with. His team put out a paper saying quite unequivocally that 350 parts per million of CO<sub>2</sub> is the max that we can have in the atmosphere, safely. We need to get below that, actually. It is a difficult number, obviously, because we have passed it. But at least it was a number, and something to work with, globally. Something to move these big international negotiations back far closer to science than they've been in the past. That's what we set out to do.

**RC: You formed 350.org?**

BM: So we formed 350.org. And we spent last year building networks and spreading the word in climate circles quite successfully.

This year our job is to take that and make it as public as possible. So we've been building great networks among people all over the world -- among all kinds of people -- young people, faith communities, environmentalists, and others, all around the world, especially in developing countries, where there hasn't been very much of this before.

I can send you pictures that just arrived from Beijing, a huge group of young people setting out for a march across China with big 350 placard. And we are now aiming at our big climactic moment, an international day of action, on Oct. 24, when we will have rallies and demonstrations, and events and acts of witness and things all over the world. There will be people high up in the mountains, in the Himalayas. There will be 350 scuba divers in the Great Barrier Reef. There will be a demonstration at

Easter Island. There will be hundreds of churches ringing their bells 350 times. You name it, around the globe. And the hope is we will be able to set a kind of psychological bar for those negotiations.

**RC: Do you think that the organizing of the last couple of years has had an impact.**

BM: Well, it did have an impact on Obama and Clinton, and got them to stiffen their positions considerably, and I guess that's having an impact now.

**RC: The Obama administration is certainly, on the climate issue, representing a clear break with the policies of the Bush administration. Are you optimistic that this administration is finally going to take the steps needed to address the problem?**

BM: I think that we need to give Obama more space, more political space to get on it. You know, he clearly wants to do a lot, whether or not he wants do enough remains to be seen. But he wants to do what he can, I think. He just doesn't have the political space now. That's why we're building a real movement behind this.

**RC: You were part of the protest at the coal-fired power plant near the U.S. Capitol last month.**

BM: Yes, [writer] Wendell Berry and I sent out these first letters asking people to come.

**RC: And you wrote an article on Yale Environment 360 that you were willing to get arrested as part of that protest.**

BM: Yes, that's why we highly illegally stood in the streets where we weren't supposed to for hours on end.

**RC: Most people wouldn't equate this with civil rights, or the Vietnam War, as an issue that demands acts of civil disobedience. You obviously think that it does. Why?**

BM: I think it demands a strong movement, and some of that may be civil disobedience. We are at the moment working hard on these big symbolic demonstrations.

This [climate change] is the largest thing that human beings have ever done. It will end up killing more people than anything human being have ever done, you know, wipe out more species than human beings have ever done, it will sicken more people with more illness than anything people have ever done. I think it is worthy of a night in jail.

**RC: You've written in fact that climate change is the biggest problem humans have ever faced...**

BM: I think there can't be much doubt about that.

**RC: You mentioned disease, which I thought was interesting, and you started**

**by saying that coming back from Bangladesh and dengue fever. Talk a little bit about how that is related to climate change.**

BM: The World Health Organization has said that dengue would be the emergent disease of this century and so far they are right. Incidences are up 100, 200, 300 percent all over South America, Asia, moving in to South Texas. And, I mean, the *Aedes Egypti*, the mosquito that spreads it, is very sensitive to temperature and humidity, and hence digs the wetter, warmer world we're creating.

**RC: In your book *Deep Economy*, and elsewhere, you have written about the need for a more localized economy. How does that tie in with the steps that we in the U.S. and other developed countries need to take in responding to climate change?**

BM: The most important thing I think we have to do as a response to climate change is to put a cap on carbon. And when we do that, one of the effects would be making fossil fuel more expensive. And one of the first effects of that in turn would be to turn the tide away from sprawling globalization, and towards a trajectory that takes us towards more local economies, more local food systems, more local production of energy, of culture and everything. And I think that is probably all to the good for environmental reasons and psychological ones as well, as I wrote most recently in *Deep Economy*.

**RC: We talked about the Obama administration, and the need to give them more space and more room to work. But to do what? What steps do you see that the U.S. needs to take, particularly before the Copenhagen [international climate] talks in December?**

BM: We sure need a strong cap on carbon. All else is commentary -- the tax, what you do with the money. But we need to stop putting so much into the atmosphere, and it's got to be clear that's going to happen. And until we commit to that, our credibility to talk with anybody else about all this is as under water as our mortgages. So that's what I hope we are going to see.

And we also need, and I think Obama realizes this, too, some really powerful diplomacy to figure out how we are going to be able to bring especially the developing world into some scenario that cuts carbon quickly. Because it is not going to be easy. Hard enough for us here in the rich world, much harder for people still mired in the poor world, for whom burning all that cheap coal is the most obvious way out.

**RC: What does the U.S. and the other developed countries need to do to bring the developing world, China and India, and other countries on board?**

BM: China and other countries, it is beginning to become very clear to them that they have a huge problem and action is wildly necessary. But they also have a very strong moral argument for it not being their responsibility. You know, it will be decades, even without the difference in population, before China is as responsible as much for global warming as we are. And at some level, the negotiation is, "You need to help us, find and pay for the alternatives to burning all that coal."

I think negotiation was going to be hard to begin with and it's harder now that the Bush administration and Wall Street have spent the last few years burning much of our money. And that's going to make it harder. No question. It's going to take creative diplomacy of a kind we haven't seen before.

**RC: It's going to make it harder because we are in an economy where any costs related to this transition are going to be harder to bear.**

BM: It's hard to persuade Americans that they really want to spend a large sum of money paying for windmills in China. But it is pretty hard to persuade the Chinese that they should have to pay for the windmills all by themselves, when we spent 200 years burning coal and getting rich in the process.

**RC: What do you think the costs are going to be to the public for a transition to this new kind of economy or putting a price on carbon? You hear arguments everywhere from the great opportunity of renewable energy to some numbers that have come out lately out of Washington that are really hyping big costs of a price on carbon. How do you see all that?**

BM: The only way that it works fast enough to make a difference is if the carbon carries a cost. That's been the problem all along. Carbon didn't carry a cost, hence we are in the trouble we are in. The question is how do you do that in a way that doesn't bankrupt everybody and that lets you do it politically.

The smartest answer to all of this has come in recent years from Peter Barnes and others who have proposed this cap and dividend proposal and [U.S. Rep.] Chris van Hollen just introduced this in the House. You make Exxon and Peabody Coal, or whoever, buy permits every year at auction to release CO<sub>2</sub>, right? They pay lot of money for them, and they pass the cost on you and the price [of gasoline] goes up to \$4 a pop and you abandon your Forest Ranger fantasy and decide to drive a small car or walk or whatever it is you are going to do.

The question becomes what you do with all that money that you just made off this auction of the permits. The utilities would like you to basically give the permits to them for free. That's ridiculous. Congress would pretty much like to take the money and spend it on something, windmills in my state, or whatever. Personally, I think that for most part that is a harder argument to make, given the things Congress has spent money on in the recent past. Corn-based ethanol being exhibit A.

So the soundest proposal, probably, is to take that money, and write a check to everybody in the country every six months... Here's your climate check. Your share of the sky. Just the way that Alaska writes everybody a check every year for their share of oil revenues in the state. So, you know, I am still getting the price at the pump to clean up my act, and I am being made whole, more or less. It's not a perfect system, but if you game it out politically, it is probably the best chance we have.

**RC: Do you think this idea is gaining any kind of traction in Washington?**

BM: I do. Obama has talked about it some. I think it's probably the fallback if Waxman/Markey [a House climate bill] runs on to the shoals. It has the great

advantage of simplicity, of a kind of political appeal that crosses partisan lines perhaps. Although God only knows if the Republicans will vote for anything. But, I think, if you think about it long enough, it's where you end up.

**RC: You have been following this issue as long as any writer I am aware of. *The End of Nature* was really the first book for a popular audience that dealt with this issue of climate change. How optimistic are you that the world will take the steps necessary to avoid what you see is the most drastic effects of climate change?**

BM: You know, for the moment I am not spending my time being either optimistic or pessimistic. I am just working. I think the answer to that largely depends on whether we can build a real movement or not. And I think the answer to that lies still, at this moment, in our hands. Not indefinitely, you know. The momentum of these systems is very strong. It's getting out of control and there are scientists who say we've waited too long to get started. But you can tell that I don't think so. Because I'm doing nothing but trying to organize.

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