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Why Van Jones' Ideas on Green Jobs Should Stay

By Bryan Walsh

I met [Van Jones](#), the social activist turned environmental czar, a few times before he joined the Obama Administration, when he was still criss-crossing the country spreading his message: that the creation of green jobs could revitalize America's eroding blue-collar class. I can't judge if some of his past statements and actions — [his signature on a letter suggesting former President George W. Bush might have allowed the Sept. 11 attacks to occur](#), his 1990s membership in an avowedly anti-capitalist group — should have disqualified him for government service. But I do know [his resignation](#) is a loss for the environmental movement, and I think, for the country as well. Because Van Jones was right about green jobs. ([Watch an interview with Van Jones about the green-collar economy.](#))

I spent a day with Jones in Oakland, Calif., his adopted hometown, back in November 2007, just as his star was beginning to rise. A Yale Law School graduate who, like Barack Obama, turned his back on a corporate paycheck and returned to work in his community, Jones founded the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in 1996, initially focusing on police brutality and prison reform. By the time I met him, Jones had shifted his attention to the environment — but not out of an overwhelming desire to save polar bears on melting icebergs or prevent the rainforest from burning in a foreign country. Jones cared primarily about the people in his community, and he knew that for those struggling to get by, the planet could never be as important as a paycheck.

Jones' genius was in welding the two issues together: hence "green jobs," new employment opportunities in solar panel installation or wind turbine manufacturing that could reduce carbon emissions even as they provided steady pay for struggling blue-collar workers. It was perfect — something for everyone — and it's no surprise that President Obama returned to the theme again and again on the campaign trail and in the White House. But it was Jones who said it first, and best. ([See the top 10 green ideas of 2008.](#))

That day in Oakland with Jones was instructive. After visiting a community garden and a job training site for solar panel installers, we spent some time back at his office, where he addressed a visiting youth group, troubled kids, about the importance of staying in school and the new opportunities that might be available — if they could seize them. Then we went to an Oakland community meeting at a local church, where Jones gave a talk that was half-sermon, half economic brief, on the coming green jobs revolution. Next we crossed the bay to San Francisco's gilded city hall, where Jones received an award from the Full

Circle Fund, a philanthropic organization founded by Silicon Valley's wealthy. That was Jones's singular talent: his ability to be a human bridge, from gritty Oakland to green San Francisco, all the way to the White House, because he knew that environmentalism could only break out of its niche if it could be made to matter to everyone. ([Read Leonardo DiCaprio's take on Van Jones.](#))

Environmentalists, Jones included, sometimes make too much of green jobs, as if we can beat climate change and poverty without paying a cent. That's obviously not true: the transition to a greener economy could be a wrenching one, and it won't be free. But it should be a better economy, a fairer one, and certainly one that is better for the planet. Jones knew that, and the movement had no better spokesperson. In some ways, he might be better off out of the White House, liberated to speak freely again, not buried in West Wing bureaucracy. I look forward to seeing him do what he does best: connect disparate communities and energize audiences from the pulpit. But the fact that he was hounded out of government should give us all pause. Jones deserved better than this — and so did we.

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