



Bill McKibben on Climate Change, COP Meetings, Activism & Solutions

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Rees Jeannotte (RJ): Hello and welcome I am Rees Jeannotte for acTVism Munich. Joining me today to talk about climate change, environmental activism and the most recent UN climate change summit and report is Bill McKibben. He is a longtime American environmental activist and founder of 350.org. Bill McKibben thanks for joining us!

Bill McKibben (BM): It's a pleasure to be with ya.

RJ: So I think it would be best for our German viewers, who may be not familiar with your work or the work of 350.org, if you could give a brief account of how you came to environmental activism and what 350.org is all about and what its mission is, so to speak.

BM: So I am a writer by background and not an activist. I wrote my first book about Climate Change for a general audience way back in 1989. So before you were born. And I've spend the last three decades following this story as closely as I could doing much more writing things. At a certain point it became clear to me that it wasn't really an argument about data and facts and that writing more books probably wasn't going to change the outcome, that it was a fight about power. We've won the argument but we were losing that fight because the fossil fuel industry is simply so rich, so politically powerful that it was able to keep doing what it was doing. And so we decided to start trying to form movements large enough to begin to match the power of the fossil fuel industry.

350.org which started more than decade ago, took its strange name from what scientist say is the most carbon we can safely have in the atmosphere – about 350 parts per million – and we're already well past that, and it's the reason that the arctic is melting or that California is burning. That's because there's 410 parts per million CO₂ in the atmosphere. 350.org has organised, we think about 20,000 rallies and demonstrations in every country on earth except North Korea and we've spearheaded the fossil fuel divestment movement, which now is at about \$ 8 trillion in worth of endowments, portfolios that have sold their stock in fossil fuel and we've helped sort of spearhead the movement against new fossil fuel infrastructure -

trying to block pipelines, new coal ports, terminals, new fracking wells and things like that. Work that's gone pretty well actually over the last decade.

RJ: 2018 – I think probably you would agree, 2018 was a pretty tumultuous year - for a lot of people climate change became a reality. (Cross talk). When you look back on 2018 and reflect back on it what are the things that really stand out most for you?

BM: I think that it really was an inflection point in a lot of ways. What had been abstract and scary for people became real and scary in awful lot of places. I think two things at least in North America happened: one was the confluence of scientific reports, especially from the intergovernmental panel on climate change that really brought home to people just how quickly this was happening. That we had 10 years or so to get things under control. The other were the incredibly scary images especially from the wildfires in California that demonstrated just viscerally how terrifying this has become. If you add on top of that the fact that pretty much everybody in America and I think around the world is now recognising that Donald Trump is a big buffoon - his continued insistence that Climate Change is a hoax - seems I think, it is actually having the opposite effect. At this point almost no one else thinks that and they know that Trump is wrong. So it's a moment of great despair in one way - the fossil fuel industry is at its height of its power and carbon emissions are going up - on the other hand a moment of perhaps of great change, as we begin to see what the future looks like.

RJ: I think it was Christian Aid had an analysis come out that the top ten climate catastrophes or in a extreme weather events that happened in 2018 amounted to something close to like \$ 85 billion in damages. This is sort of the backdrop that we're talking about when we talk about the UN climate summits of course which are there to try and bring something like 200 countries together to find a solution to this problem. They are also known as the COPs or the Conference of Parties. Can you maybe touch a bit on the history of the COPs and give your assessment of the most recent COP which happened in Katowice Poland?

BM: Sure. There have been 24 now of these Conference of the Parties dating back into the 1990s. And they reached their kind of culmination I think in Paris in the 21st set of these in 2015. And that was the point at which the world actually did manage to strike a deal - not a particularly great one - but a start you know. And I'm afraid that's going to be the high water mark of the UN process. Since then because Trump has pulled America out of the Paris accords because other countries have begun to backslide and so on. It seems unlikely that there will be much more progress made by the UN - I think the progress now is going to have to come country by country and company by company as we break their political power. That said there were some great moments at the COP in Katowice. The greatest of them was when Greta Thunberg - the 15 year old Swedish schoolgirl - got up and told the assembled world leaders just how far off the mark they were. She said that we make young people describe the problem realistically because you can't bring yourselves to do - shame on you - and I think that message was heard loud and clear. And I think it's one of the reasons that school children around the world including large numbers in Germany have been on strike in recent weeks.

RJ: Well you mentioned the IPCC report - the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report - what's your view on this report? Does it go far enough? I mean at the conference itself a lot of countries recognized the report, several countries including the United States,

Brasil, Saudi Arabia just wanted to note that it was done. They accepted the fact that it was done. What do you make of this 12 years to get our ducks in a row, so to speak?

BM: Well look, in fact the scientists in the IPCC have been sort of behind the curve for a very long time. You know the consensus method that they use means the studies that they are looking at are often 5 and 6 years out of date. But I do think that they are beginning to catch up to what's actually going on in the physical world and that's frightening for everybody to hear about. There wasn't in a sense that much new in the IPCC report but the fact that they said, with real urgency, is different. The fact that they're beginning to make it clear to people that this is the first human problem that comes with the distinct time limit and if we don't meet that time limit then we cannot solve the problem. That's probably a new emphasis and a really important.

RJ: One of the things that they probably they don't mention - I mean - seeming to be unwilling to say or willing to take that extra step is to criticize the economic system we have. Mainly consumption capitalism, industrial capitalism, which is the key factor in pushing all of this global warming. What's the way forward anyway?

BM: There's been a thought by some people for a long time that we cannot solve the climate crisis until we change everything to use the title of Naomi Klein's wonderful book. I think what she actually meant when she wrote that book, and I think what I've come to think, is that the climate crisis is actually an opportunity to change a lot of things and if we change some of those things it would have effects on the rest of the system. So, think about the world at the moment and the amount of power - illegitimate power - that goes to people who just happen to live on top of deposits or coal or oil or natural gas. That is why Vladimir Putin is important and its not cause he has some amazing insight about the world or some brilliant ideology. That's why the Koch brothers are important in the United States, it's not because they have some remarkable political insight. It's because they're the biggest oil and gas barons in North America. That's why anyone pays the slightest bit of attention to the Saudi royal family. You know, they're thugs, murderers, but they have a lot of oil - so what do you do?

If we move quickly to a world that runs on the sun and wind – that instant you saw in Germany how quickly these changes in power and wealth can start to happen. How many years did it take for RWE to go from being the biggest, most dominant, utility in Central Europe to being a bankrupt relic of itself. Play that out across the world and you see some very big changes in how political power and wealth are distributed. One of the good things about renewable energy is, by definition, it's more decentralised and more democratic than the fossil fuels it replaces.

RJ: How about that wealth, and particularly wealth inequality coupled with climate change. Do you think those two things can be fought separately or do they need to be fought together? I mean, you have ideas, for example, originally from the Green Party - the Green New Deal - now slowly being adopted by some progressives in the Democratic Party and so on. What are your thoughts on the different ways we can approach this problem?

BM: I think that they definitely should be fought together, and I think it's a big coalition of people who want change that will make it happen. But I think the Green New Deal is a good illustration of how the fact that we're in a deep crisis over climate change may allow us to act

more broadly across a wide variety of issues than we would have been able to before. Look, we have no choice but to do some very dramatic things if we're going to deal with the greatest crisis that humans have ever faced. So in the process we might as well try to make the world a fairer place too.

RJ: What are some of those dramatic things that we need to do?
Obviously, keeping the coal and the oil in the ground, but...

BM: I think there's three basic things. People talk a lot about putting a price on carbon and that's a useful thing to do. There's no reason that the fossil fuel company should be allowed to pollute for free, but at this point by itself that won't do the trick. Maybe if we'd started 30 years ago that would have been enough but now we also, as you say, have to keep carbon fuels in the ground. We need active policies to make sure we do not dig them up because they are dangerous. And we need a massive government program around the world to put renewables up much more quickly than economics alone will do it. We need an industrial push, in this country what we say often, is a push like the one that we had at the start of the Second World War when the rise of fascism in Europe scared Americans to the point that they reoriented their entire industrial capacity for a period of years. So those three things seems to me to be the clear way forward.

RJ: So what are the solutions politically? What is the best route, I mean to say? We're talking about activism, direct action going onto the streets, blocking pipelines, going out to the street, getting arrested and so on, or you have movements like the Sunrise Movement trying to impress upon the Democratic Party to move in a green direction.

BM: All these things are useful and they're all complimentary. In a sense, the work of activists is less to try and get particular pieces of legislation, though that's important, than it is to change the zeitgeist – to change people's idea of what's natural and normal and obvious, what's going to happen. Once you do that then the legislative victories come more easily. But it's all part and parcel of the same thing and it's very exciting to see in the (United) States the Green New Deal gaining some traction. You know, don't underestimate the fossil fuel companies, they remain vicious and somewhat cornered animals, and so the fight will be very intense.

RJ: Oh perhaps this is just anecdotal, if you have anecdotal evidence of this, but what's your feeling of activism on the ground or the movement? How are things? I mean we haven't obviously got a lot of time.

BM: I think that the movement is very strong and stronger all the time. I've loved watching the climate strikes spread in the wake of Greta Thunberg's dramatic action. I've loved watching the Green New Deal action in the United States and elsewhere around the world

Well, you know, it is worth saying that there are large parts of the world where there isn't as much of a movement as there needs to be, and that's one of the reasons 350.org worked so hard in some of the places that we pay less attention to, but that nonetheless are on the verge of building a lot of coal-fired power plants or opening new oil wells, or whatever it is. This has to be a worldwide effort; they don't call it global warming for nothing.

RJ: Yeah, it might be interesting to note here that in Munich schoolchildren are protesting every Friday, inspired by Greta Thunberg. This is growing – it's a growing thing happening here. So my question to you now is what can regular people do? The obvious things are, people think, “Oh I can recycle, I can (you know) I can consume less”, but people who have a 9 to 5 job. Obviously there have to be activists who are full-time and dedicated but for regular people...

BM: I actually think that it's the full-time activists are a lot less important than people joining in movements – just for a day at a time, or a month at a time, or whatever it is. Look, we're past the point where you can make the math of climate change work with individual actions. Yes, everybody should do the right things: the roof of my house is covered with solar panels but I don't really try to fool myself that that's how we're going to stop climate change. If we're going to do it it's going to be with change of policies, systems around the world, and for that to happen people's main energy and main effort has to be on building these movements. The most important thing an individual can do is be a little bit less of an individual: come together with others in these political pushes for real and dramatic change.

RJ: And finally how do you stay positive? You, Bill McKibben, how do you stay positive facing such an uphill battle? How can activists and others who are – maybe not just activists – but for people who really want to to push this, how can they not let it bog them down? And how do you not end up with burnout and keep yourself mentally fit?

BM: These are good questions and since I've been going at it for 30 years in some ways I guess it's easier for me; I've built up the muscles over a long period of time, but that doesn't mean I don't get despairing some of the time. I do. When I do, I reflect on the fact of just how many people around the world are in this fight now. Sometimes I go and look at the pictures of some of those demonstrations and things that 350 has organised in every part of the world. Many of those people are in parts of the world that did nothing to cause the problem we're in. If they're willing to fight to get us out of that fix then that's seems to me reason enough for the rest of us – who really did contribute to this crisis to be doing all that we can.

RJ: Bill McKibben, thanks so much for joining us.

BM: My pleasure. You have a very good day and thank you for your good work.

RJ: You too, thanks a lot. And thank you for watching. Please don't forget to subscribe to our YouTube channel. Click on the bell if you'd like to receive notifications when we release new material. And if you like what you just saw and would like to help support us in our work, you can do so by way of donation. All the details on how to donate you can find at [activism.org](https://www.activism.org). Thanks once again, and we'll see you next time.

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