

## **BILL MOYERS interviews BILL McKIBBEN**

**Moyers:** Let's pause right here and talk about this present moment as reality, not fable. Here's what your story prompts me to ask: When people realize the current order of things no longer works and the institutions of government and society are failing to fix them — failing to solve the problems democracy creates for itself — what options do they have?

**McKibben:** Well, I don't think we're in a place where rebellion in the sense of the American Revolution works anymore. One of the reasons that I'm a big advocate of nonviolence is that it's the only thing that makes sense. Taking up arms against a government that has the world's biggest supply of them is just a bad idea right from the start. But that doesn't mean there aren't other ways to resist, and we're seeing more and more of it coming from all directions. There are lots of lawyers testing what we can still do with the courts. There are demonstrators in the streets reminding us that when people rise up in large numbers, it makes it more difficult for the government to do bad things. There are people on social media and people jamming the switchboards on Capitol Hill, and there are people by thousands getting ready to run for office in this country, and people trying all kinds of different routes. To me, the thing that activists work for more than anything is not a new law. It's a change in the zeitgeist.

**Moyers:** The spirit of the times.

**McKibben:** Yes. That's the end result of most really big campaigning, and once you get that change in the zeitgeist, then the change in laws and legislation comes relatively easily. But it's winning that battle in the culture, in the atmosphere around us, as it were.

**Moyers:** For example?

**McKibben:** The great example in recent times is how effectively people organized around gay marriage. Now, you and I are both old enough to remember when that seemed like an utterly impossible ideal. In fact, five years ago Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were still dead set against it because it didn't poll well. But people changed that. Activists managed to change the zeitgeist around those questions to the point where others began to realize, "Hey, we like people falling in love. Falling in love and getting married is a good thing. We should have more of it and not less." And the minute that that line was crossed, then the battle was for all intents and purposes over.

**Moyers:** Climate change hasn't been so easy.

**McKibben:** It's harder with many other things. The fight around climate change, which I've spent my life on, is somewhat more difficult because no one makes trillions of dollars a year being a bigot, and that's how much the fossil-fuel industry pulls in pumping carbon into the air. But the principle is the same, I think.

**Moyers:** For me the question now is how much time do we have? When it comes to global warming, all signs suggest we are running out of time.

**McKibben:** The question of time is the question that haunts me. I remain optimistic enough to think that in general human beings will figure out the right thing to do eventually, and Americans will somehow get back on course. Of course, there'll be a lot of damage done in the meantime. But with climate change in particular — the gravest of the problems we face — time is the one thing we don't have. It's the only problem we've ever had that came with a time limit. And if we don't solve it soon, we don't solve it. Our governments so far have not proven capable of dealing with this question. They simply haven't been able to shake off the self-interest and massive power of the fossil-fuel industry. It's going to take a lot of work and a lot of effort to get us onto renewable energy quickly and everywhere. It's doable technically; the question is whether it's doable politically or not. There I don't know.

**Moyers:** You've said that winning slowly in this fight—

**McKibben:** Winning slowly is another way of losing. Look, we're screwing up our health care system again right now. That's going to cause grave trouble for people over the next five, 10 years. There are going to be lots of people who die, lots of people who are sick, lots of people who go bankrupt. It's going to be horrible. But 10 years from now it will not be harder to solve the problem because you ignored it for those 10 years. It won't have changed into some completely other problem. With climate change, that's not true. As each year passes, we move past certain physical tipping points that make it impossible to recover large parts of the world that we have known.

**Moyers:** Just last week we got the [National Climate Assessment Report](#), which says we're now living in the warmest period in the history of modern civilization, and that the average global concentration of carbon dioxide has surged to the highest level in approximately 3 million years. Three million years!

**McKibben:** Three million years, and the last time there was this much CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, the temperature of the planet settled several degrees higher, which results in approximately a 20-meter rise in the level of the oceans. Times Square is 16 meters above sea level, just to give you a little bit of reference. We're playing with forces so enormous now. As you know, I wrote the first book about climate change almost 30 years ago—

**Moyers:** 1989.

**McKibben:** When I started writing about it, climate change was still theoretical and abstract. Now it bludgeons you weekly. Think about the last eight weeks and confine yourself to the small percent of the planet that's covered by the United States. We had the greatest rainstorm in American history. Hurricane Harvey came ashore in your old state of Texas and dropped 54 inches in parts of Houston. That's more rain than we've ever seen at one time in the United States. Hurricane Irma, on its heels, is the longest ever recorded on the planet — longest storm with a wind speed above 185 miles an hour. Maria comes to Puerto Rico 10 days after that, it knocks an entire island 30 years back in its development. It's going to be that long before they get back to where they were in August. And then look at what happens in California after the hottest and driest summer ever recorded there. Napa and Sonoma, which are as close as you get to our definition of what constitutes the good life — you know, prosperous beautiful

communities, surrounded by big buckets of wine — Napa and Sonoma burn in the course of hours. People flee for their lives and the people who are slow don't make it.

**Moyers: We are divided, it seems to me, between the passionately ignorant and the passively informed. And therefore paralyzed.**

**McKibben:** We have to take some percentage of the passively informed and make them into the actively engaged. That's what movement-building is about. And we don't have to get all of them. There's a wonderful new book by the Engler brothers called [\*This is an Uprising\*](#). It's an impressive history of nonviolence, a great sort of accounting of what we know from the last 50 or 75 years of nonviolent resistance. One of the things they find — and I think they're quoting an academic named Erica Chenoweth — is that if you can get 3.5 percent of the population actively engaged in some fight, then you usually win. That makes intuitive sense to me. What it means is that apathy cuts both ways. If you have a largely unengaged population, then some people getting engaged can move it in big ways. We saw that with the tea party quite effectively.

**Moyers: They took over the Republican Party.**

**McKibben:** That's right, and now we need to see it from the other direction.

**Moyers: Standing against the tide of movement that you and others are creating is something you haven't really faced before. A president as defiant as you, who insists that climate change isn't real. He and his cronies are twisting themselves into pretzels to justify blocking efforts to reverse global warming.**

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— **Bill McKibben**

**McKibben:** Absolutely. We may well run out of time. Part of me has never been particularly optimistic about the fight. The name of that book that I wrote back in 1989 was [\*The End of Nature\*](#) — not a very cheerful title. So we may well run out of time. But at the very least now, the one heartening thing is we are not going to run out of fight. It's going to be a battle. It's being engaged every day all over the world. And that at least is some consolation.

**Moyers: Are there other consolations?**

**McKibben:** It's not an impossible battle, because the engineers have done their job too. The last 10 years, we've watched the price of a solar panel fall 80 percent. That means there is no longer any mystery about what we do. If we were serious, we would put up a lot of solar panels.

**Moyers: As the Chinese are doing.**

**McKibben:** The Chinese are rapidly doing it.

**Moyers: I saw some news footage the other night: hundreds of acres in China — thousands — covered with solar panels.**

**McKibben:** The Chinese are trolling us. They're building hundreds of giant solar parks in the shape, from the air, [of pandas](#). You look down and there's a panda's face composed entirely of solar panels. I think they're just making fun of us.



Prototype of Chinese wind farm in the shape of a panda. (UNDP)

**Moyers:** I don't think any reader who knows you will put this book down without asking what does Bill McKibben think we can do now, given the folly of our government? What can we do about the fate of the Earth as the planet gets hotter and the United States turns thumbs down on responding. As you just said, you spent the last 30 years trying to warn us about the threat. You've written important books, you've produced stellar journalism, you've traveled and lectured, protested and petitioned. You've organized and led marches and got yourself arrested outside Barack Obama's White House. Indeed, it wasn't until things like that happened that Obama finally woke up and started coming up with policies to fight global warming. It took that long to move a progressive Democrat. Now we have a president surrounded by like-minded cronies and supported by a Congress controlled by Republicans, a party that seems absolutely willing to let the Earth burn for profit. What would you have us do against such — such counter-resistance?

**McKibben:** You're right; we can't make any progress in DC, at least for now. One of the things that we have to do in the moment is make a lot of progress in the places we can: in local

communities, in states and cities where we have enough political purchase to get things done. And really that's a larger span of places than you would think.

**Moyers: That's what you and several thousand other people were doing the other night here in Carnegie Hall, wasn't it?**

**McKibben:** We had a great [gathering here in Carnegie Hall](#). We were kicking off this [1,000 Cities Campaign](#). Between the [Sierra Club](#) and a bunch of other allies we've been asking cities in the last year to commit to 100-percent renewable energy, I think there's [47 major American cities](#) that have done that now. At first it was the obvious ones — Berkeley, California, and Madison, Wisconsin — but now it's Atlanta and Salt Lake City and San Diego, among others. You'll recall that when President Trump pulled us out of the Paris Climate Accord — by the way, just think about that for a minute: a truly shameful thing to say that America, which has put more carbon in the atmosphere than any other country, was going to go back on its word, break its word, walk away from its commitments to an international body — he said, "I was elected to govern Pittsburgh, not Paris." That afternoon the mayor of Pittsburgh announced, "We're going to make our city 100-percent renewable energy, thank you very much," which was at the moment the best response you could give Trump. Bill, we have to believe that some combination of events, and we can see some of them forming, may cause the fever in Washington to break. But we can't sit around just hoping for that to happen and nothing else. Our job in the meantime is to take on as many places as we can and start making them work again. Not just on climate, although that's really key, but on 100 other questions as well from voting rights to fair taxation to all the other things that are being suppressed on a national level.

**Moyers: What specifically did you ask that packed house at Carnegie Hall to do?**

**McKibben:** At this point I'm much more of an organizer than a writer, I guess, and I couldn't stand the thought of just getting up and giving a speech to 2,500 people without asking them to do something. We inserted a blank sheet of paper in their programs. In between listening to Joan Baez and Patti Smith and Michael Stipe and many other great heroes, I asked them to write Scott Stringer, the comptroller of the city of New York. Now, that's not a job that necessarily gives you a lot of latitude to fight climate change, except that he's ultimately the guy in charge of the hundreds of billions of dollars in pension funds from New York City. And believe it or not, a bunch of that is invested in fossil-fuel companies. That makes no financial sense, as the fossil fuel guys have lost more money than anybody else over the last five years — that's why people like the Rockefeller brothers, for heaven's sake, divested. It makes no moral sense. These are the guys who gamed our political system — as Eric Schneiderman, the New York attorney general, is demonstrating daily as he goes after ExxonMobil. It makes no practical sense, Bill — New York City is going to spend billions upon billions building seawalls to try and protect Wall Street. Why would you be investing the city's cash in the companies that are making that work necessary?

**Moyers: But of course like many politicians, the comptroller and the mayor of New York have been better at talking about this than doing anything about it. And they're saying, "Well, we'll take this slowly, we'll have some more studies."**



**McKibben:** We've run out of years in which to have studies. This stuff comes at us now so fast that we need change in real time. So, I hope that Mr. Stringer, who may well be a good progressive, will decide this is within his ambit, that he'll be able to take this step and take it soon.

**Moyers:** You mention ExxonMobil. I have to pinch myself to see if I am awake in the real world when I am reminded that Donald Trump made the CEO of ExxonMobil the US secretary of state. This is the company whose chief scientist told senior management in 1979 that the temperature would rise at least 4–5 degrees Fahrenheit and that it would be a disaster. And what did ExxonMobil do?

**McKibben:** They did two things. Here's the real horror. They completely believed it. They went and built all their drilling rigs to compensate for the sea level rise they knew was coming. But they didn't tell any of the rest of us. Instead they spend hundreds of millions of dollars building the architecture of deceit and denial and disinformation that's kept us locked in this 25-year debate about whether global warming was "real" or not, a debate that both sides knew the answer to when it began. It's just that one of them was lying about the answer.

**Moyers:** What kind of capitalism is it that puts everyone on earth at risk and lies about it for the sake of profit?

**McKibben:** I'm afraid it's [Ayn Randian capitalism](#) — the elevation of the rich to a point of such incredible power that no one can question them. And the only way to deal with that is to build collective power in response. This is the perfect example of the fight of the many and the small against the few and the very big. Hey, there's a great picture on my wall from a couple of summers ago. Shell wanted to go drill in the Arctic.

**Moyers:** Shell Oil?

**McKibben:** Yes, Shell Oil. It was insane. Scientists had said, "If you keep burning coal and gas and oil, you will melt the Arctic." And then the Arctic melted just as they had predicted. Did Shell Oil look at the melt and say, "Huh, maybe we should go into the solar-panel business instead?" No, Shell Oil looked at that and said, "Oh, well, now that it's melted it will be easier to drill for more oil up there." That's enough to make you doubt about the big brain being a good adaptation, no? But when they started to take their giant — and I mean giant — drill rig up there to the Arctic from the harbor in Seattle, thousands of people in small craft came out on the water to block it. We called them kayaktavists. And they did so much brand damage to Shell that before the summer was out, Shell threw up its hands and said, "You know what? We're out of the Arctic drilling business," and walked away from their \$7 billion investment. Sometimes people can stand up to the monolith. We just better figure out how to do it effectively and fast.

**Moyers:** Has there been a corporate crime greater than the fossil-fuel industry's propaganda against the truth of global warming since — well, since German industry became part of Hitler's killing machine?

**McKibben:** Philip Morris took us down one smoker at a time, but Exxon's going one planet at a time. These guys are setting all kinds of records.

**Moyers:** But it's not just industry that is undermining our efforts to cope with global warming. It's not just those moneybags at the oil companies and the utilities that are engaging in predatory delay. It's a whole lot of folks. Scenery lovers who try to block windmills on the grounds that they will kill birds. Labor unions that try to build pipelines — you've written about how the AFL/CIO came out for building the Dakota Access Pipeline, even after the company sicced German shepherds on peaceful indigenous protesters. Then there are all us urban liberals who resist denser populations in the centers of our cities.

**McKibben:** Sure, there's a part of all of us whose impulse is to say, "Let's keep everything the same until I die and then you can do whatever you want afterward." [laughs] And that's a difficult part. But Bill, most people don't spend their lives hiring lobbyists to make sure that that happens, don't have the trillions of dollars to spend to make sure that the political system obeys their impulses. So that's why at places like [350.org](http://350.org) we look first to the biggest players and try to exert as much leverage as we can there.

**Moyers:** Just as you say in *Radio Free Vermont*, movements are the heart of resistance, of change.

**McKibben:** They're what we've got. Look, do I think that people should in the best of all possible worlds have to go to jail for wanting our government to pay attention to the warnings of scientists about climate change? Not really. I mean, in a rational world, if all the scientists said, "The worst thing that ever happened is about to happen and here's what you should do to stop it," you would expect any rational system to say, "Oh, sure, OK, let's do something about it." But that's not the world we live in. In the world we live in, you do need people willing to stand up, fight, march and sometimes go to jail.

**Moyers:** But let's take a concrete reality. There's one guy in Washington who has more power than your movement — or so it would seem — and his name is Scott Pruitt. He's the guy Donald Trump has turned loose to destroy the Environmental Protection Agency. Pruitt thinks climate science is a hoax. He's a hack for the energy industry, a tool. He's shredded the budget for global warming. He's making it impossible for us to get from the EPA the science we need to know about climate change. He's stripping independent experts from the EPA Science Advisory Board so he can replace them with representatives of oil and gas companies. He's a fanatic — including a religious fanatic, to be frank — he even quoted the Bible last week to justify what he's doing to the Science Advisory Board. He protects himself around the clock with an 18-man security detail. He even has a soundproof booth built near his office so nobody can hear him colluding with corporate lawyers. Scott Pruitt has a killer's instinct, and he's clearly prepared to see the Earth burn up and people with it as long as his enablers can make money. What do you do about a Scott Pruitt, firmly ensconced in office, backed by the Trump White House, willfully, even cheerfully, doing everything he can do every day to impede the fight against global warming and environmental destruction?

**McKibben:** In the very short run, there's nothing we can do. This was the Koch brothers' fantasy come to life. This is what they've worked for all those years that you've covered what they've been doing. In the slightly longer run, we do what we can within the electoral system to

try and rein them in. If we get to the 2018 congressional races and the Democrats take back either the Senate or House, there will be at least some check on what Trump and the Republicans can do, or at least some ability to investigate and subpoena what they are doing. In the longer run, though — the slightly longer run, because we don't have a great deal of long run — what we have to do is what I said earlier: not be content merely with playing defense, but with really changing the zeitgeist. Because it's important to remember that wonderful as he looks in retrospect, Barack Obama wasn't solving this problem either. In Obama's time, and with his blessings, the US passed Russia and Saudi Arabia to become the biggest producer of hydrocarbons on the planet. I like Barack Obama and I voted for him twice, and if he were still president, I'd be outside his door again the next day demanding that he actually do something about these problems. And that's the work that goes on. It's not going to be pretty in the short run, Bill. We're getting routed. But we better take that as the reminder not to give up our game but to change as best we can the places where we're fighting. That's why this move toward smaller and more local fights is imperative right now.

**Moyers:** Global warming may be the most immediate and biggest problem we face, but there's a deeper reason we're not confronting it than Trump, Pruitt and the Republicans. It's what moved Vern Barclay and his co-conspirators to think about secession. Let me read you these headlines:

[\*"Is this the end of democracy?"\*](#)

[\*"Is American democracy headed to extinction?"\*](#)

[\*"Across the globe, a growing disillusionment with democracy"\*](#)

[\*"Democracy in decline"\*](#)

[\*"Yes, American democracy could break down"\*](#)

**Do you think it could happen here — that enough people stop caring about democracy and give up doing what is necessary to save it?**

**McKibben:** I think it definitely could. It causes me to lose sleep at night. It's one of the reasons I like living where I live, because I'm convinced that we'll reseed that democracy from the bottom up, from the town meetings of the world, from people organizing and coming together. But whether we can do it in time or not is absolutely an open question, and it's the most trying and vexing open question that we face.

**Moyers:** Is it possible that we're approaching the limits of our ability to govern as a democracy?

**McKibben:** It's possible that we're approaching the limits in terms of size. Three hundred million people are a lot to govern at once. It's possible that we're also approaching it in terms of concentrations of wealth and power, which make our system unstable and erratic. When we've reached the point where 10 or 20 Americans have as much wealth as half of their countrymen, it's a little much to expect that our system's going to work very well. Yes, we're clearly at the limits of something systemic, and if we cannot figure out how to make democracy work, then not only are we in trouble, but the planet is in a great deal of trouble, too. Always before, when governments collapsed or civilizations have gone under, the damage has been somewhat limited to the geographic proximity of that place. But because of climate change, we're now at the



moment where what happens in a place as big and important as the United States happens everywhere. And that's what keeps me up at night. That's what makes it necessary to have some good local beer from time to time and dream the occasional dream about what a different future might look like.

**Moyers: Thank you, Bill McKibben.**