The Technofixers' Tragic Myopia

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Like all the global-warming commentators who between them get almost all the press that's not pro-fossil fuels, Bill McKibben seems trapped in the faulty logic of the technofix. To understand the pseudo-green vision, read McKibben's recent essay "The Fierce Urgency of Now" that appeared in the Toronto Star and the Common Dreams website (and below).

McKibben says in his March 25, 2009 essay, as he has repeated many times, that the number 350 (parts per million carbon dioxide in the atmosphere) is the goal of our time. Yes, if we don't manage it (better yet, 300 ppm, toward the pre-industrial era) we're all cooked. But it's in the implementation-scheme that we must not be manipulated and tragically misled.

McKibben says we must "reverse the fossil fuel economy", but we must END the fossil fuel economy. Now -- not in "ten years." The fossil fuel economy is collapsing anyway, and since it has no future -- due to the workings of petrocollapse (discussed in this column innumerable times) -- it must be shut down by grassroots action. This will take the form of community survival strategies, not government policy initiatives or green venture capitalism.

For McKibben to advocate a "clean energy" transition to a green consumer economy without a fundamental culture change means several things. One is that he does not "get" peak oil or the impossibility of replacing the petroleum infrastructure. Another major error on his part is his corporate position of better cars being the answer; rather, they are the threat. If we waste time on this scam that does not promise to save energy or lives, then McKibben may as well be campaigning for 460 ppm instead of 350. Let us briefly excoriate the corporate news media that is much more friendly to the technofix trap than to fundamental change:

How the News Media Are Killing You

Corporate news coverage -- what most U.S. citizens are getting for print and electronic news -- is offering some real and important stories. The trouble is, when it's a game not to mention anything uncorporate, such as car-free living, then the public is not hearing the whole truth of our world that the media pretend to cover faithfully.

The list of taboo subjects is pretty significant. Of course the news media can't cover everything, or too many things equally. However, using again the example of car-free living, there are reasons having to do with advertising, for example. Most daily newspapers not only have ads but whole sections of the newspaper once a week called Driving or Car Style.

- Jan Lundberg, March 30, 2009

Bill McKibben and Common(place thinking) Dreams

It may help to imagine "Common Dreams" as rightfully being called "Technofix Dreams." The news service has many a good column, but they stop short of advocating action to bring down the dominant system and immediately begin new economics for the post-collapse world. The editorial staff there has gotten Culture Change reports for several years at three email addresses, but has never acknowledged one inquiry from me or run one of our reports. It's unprofessional, but the reason for this is what's key:

They have an agenda, business and political if not psychological. These non-radical reformers, with McKibben in the lead for their enviro dreams, are dangerous for offering false hope to the somewhat clueless, well-meaning consumers who may fear living in a teepee and not being able to drive to the store ever again.

The climate-action issue has been framed by McKibben and other liberals as one of "getting" global warming -- but on their terms. Understanding the potential disaster is only half of getting it. Even GW Bush "gets" global warming.

And to frame the issue as wanting or not wanting a windmill nearby is a clever argument, when that's not the issue. I'm not really fearful of a windmill "out my window" (despite wind turbine syndrome actually affecting one's health), but I'm also for sacrificing the cars McKibben thinks we need. Cars and their global-warming pavement are an eyesore too. I'm for other eyesores, such as a compost heap you have to walk by a few times a day, or the worm bin in the kitchen.

Slashing carbon and methane emissions is still unpopular and non-funded as a primary program or movement. McKibben puts "energy conservation" in his short list, but it's not first. And what does it mean? Conserving a fossil fuel for later use, to let our grandkids participate in the consumption of it? Better than energy conservation is energy curtailment permanently in a "new" cultural paradigm.

What if you had a serious health crisis and the doctor said "This is due to the patient's misfortune on such-and-such time and at such-and-such place, and we have to take immediate action." Fine, but what if his method is bloodletting? Or just a band-aid? No thanks, get out of the way, Doc.

Finally, McKibben's ignoring the fact that the renewable energy industry and a new grid cannot be financed. The economy is finished, or getting there. He doesn't see the connection to petroleum, or the fact that the renewable energy industries are dependent on fossil fuels and cannot renew themselves.

So what is a better approach? See the Pledge for Climate Protection. For news and commentary get on the Global Warming Crisis Council listserve. GWCC was conceived for action, not "let's rebuild the infrastructure to maintain our alleged energy needs."

The talking heads of today, the good and the bad, will disappear from the scene as collapse unfolds, unless one of them happens to be your neighbor in your local bioregional tribe.

The last time I took Bill McKibben to task this way was in 1996 in the Auto-Free Times. I had visited Kerala, India, which he had recently written about. When my daughter and I found his observations were way off the mark and we said so in our magazine, he had an unfriendly reaction in a letter to me that he ordered not be be printed. A couple of years later a friend of his, the editor of Outside magazine, interviewed me for Metropolis magazine that turned out to be a hatchet job on this depaver.

I applaud good works and good guys, but I blow the whistle on illogical or tainted positions at a time of life and death for the Earth's ecological biodiversity.

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The Fierce Urgency of Now"

Yes, windmills and dams deface the landscape but the climate crisis demands immediate action

Mar 25, 2009

Bill McKibben

Author of 'The End of Nature'

Don't be too "Canadian" about the backlash – this is no time for Mr. Nice Guy

Watching the backlash against clean energy projects build in Canada has moved me to think about what Americans have learned from facing this same problem. I have been thinking and writing for several years about overcoming conflict-avoidance and the importance of standing up for "Big Truths" even at the price of criticizing fellow environmentalists.

It's not that I've developed a mean streak. It's that the environmental movement has reached an important point of division, between those who truly get global warming, and those who don't.

By get, I don't mean understanding the chemistry of carbon dioxide, or the importance of the Kyoto Protocol, or those kinds of things – pretty much everyone who thinks of themselves as an environmentalist has reached that point. By get, I mean understanding that the question is of transcending urgency, that it represents the one overarching global civilizational challenge that humans have ever faced.

In the U.S., there are all manner of fights to stop or delay every imaginable low-carbon technology. Wind, solar, run-of-river hydro – these are precisely the kinds of renewable energy that every Earth Day speech since 1970 has trumpeted. But now they are finally here – now that we're talking about particular projects in particular places – people aren't so keen.

Opponents of renewable energy projects point out (correctly) that they have impacts – there are (overstated) risks to birds from wind turbines, to fish from run-of-river hydro, that the projects mean "development" somewhere there was none and transmission lines where there were none before.

They point out (again correctly) that the developers are private interests, rushing to develop a resource that, in fact, they do not own, and without waiting for the government to come up with a set of rules and processes for siting such installations.

The critics also insist that there's a "better" site somewhere – and again they're probably right. There's almost always a better site for anything. The whole business is messy, imperfect.

If we had decades to burn, then perhaps the opponents would be right that there's a better site, and a nicer developer. There's always a better site and a nicer developer. But in the real world, we have at most 10 years to reverse the fossil fuel economy. Which means we have to do everything quickly – conservation and plug-in cars and solar panels and compact fluorescents and 100-mile food and tree planting. And windmills, windmills everywhere there is wind, just like off the shores of Europe.

Whatever natural endowments a region is blessed to have, these are the basis for your green economy: solar in the deserts, wind where it's windy, hydro where water's falling, geothermal if you've got it. Do it all, and do it quickly.

In the ideal world, we'd do everything slowly and carefully – but this planet is rapidly becoming the worst of all possible worlds, a place that before my daughter dies may well see temperatures exceeding anything since before the dawn of primate evolution. A planet facing hundreds of millions of environmental refugees as a result of rising seas, with heat waves like the one that killed 35,000 in Europe becoming commonplace occurrences.

The evidence gets worse by the day: already whole nations are evacuating, the Arctic is melting and we have begun to release the massive storehouse of carbon trapped under the polar ice. Scientists figure the "safe" level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is about 350 parts per million. This is the most important number in the world. Go beyond it for very long and we will trigger "feedbacks" that will result in runaway warming spiralling out of any human control and resulting in a largely inhospitable planet.

We are already well beyond 350 and accelerating rapidly in the wrong direction.

So when local efforts to delay or stop low-carbon energy projects come into conflict with the imperative to act urgently on global warming, they have to take second place. Because even if we win every other battle, if we lose 350, it won't make any difference at all. You can "keep" every river and bay and lake and mountain and wilderness, but if the temperature goes up 3 degrees globally, it won't matter. The fish that live there won't be able to survive, the trees that anchor the landscape will die, the coral reefs will bleach and crumble. Whatever the particular part of the world that we're each working on, it's still a part of the world. Global warming is the whole thing.

Believe me that I understand how difficult this is. I have spent a lifetime loving and fighting for the Adirondacks and other treasured areas. Perhaps you've spent your life fighting for birds, and I understand how wrenching it must be to acknowledge that "some birds may die from this wind farm." But what 350 forces us to say is: every bird, every fish, and everything else that we know, is fundamentally at risk in the next few decades.

In the name of birds, I want that windmill on my ridge. In the name of rivers, I want run-of-river hydro. In the name of wild beauty, I want that windmill out my window.

350 means it is too late to be arguing for theories or cool ideas. In the real world, the one where CO2 inconveniently traps solar radiation, you don't get to argue for perfection.

You can say, as opponents of clean energy projects have said, that we'd do more to fight global warming by improving gas mileage in our cars. You can say that we should insulate our homes and build better refrigerators. You can say that we should plant more trees and have fewer kids.

And you would be right, just as every Earth Day speech is "right." I've given my share of Earth Day speeches. And if we're to have any chance of heading off catastrophic temperature increase, we have to do everything we can imagine, all at once. Hybrid cars and planting trees, windmills, energy conservation, carbon taxes, emissions caps, closing the coal plants and pressuring our leaders.

I understand the opposition to clean energy projects. And I would have supported the opponents years ago – before climate science became clear. I live in the mountains above Lake Champlain, where the wind blows strong along the ridgelines. I'll battle to keep windmills out of designated wilderness if that ever comes up, but right now I'm joining those who are battling to get them built on the ridgeline nearest our home. And battling to see them not as industrial eyesores, but as part of a new aesthetic. The wind made visible.

The slow, steady turning that blows us into a future less hopeless than the future we're steaming toward now.

Bill McKibben is co-founder of 350.org, a global grassroots organizing campaign on climate change, and a guest blogger on www.zerocarboncanada.ca.

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The Fierce Urgency of Now

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