



June 2019

Charting How We Get There

Forum: *The Climate Movement: What's Next?*

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What is the Climate Movement's State of Play?

I share Bill McKibben's sentiments 100%. I have worked in the climate trenches for twenty years, and I have always said that if you think you understand the climate crisis and you haven't yet had that awful sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach, you haven't understood the climate crisis.

The global climate movement built steadily until the failed Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009, after which so many people felt defeated. It was soon rebuilding, however, and by 2015, it was strong again following the successful Paris Climate Conference. Since then, there has been a steady increase in the intensity of organizing, and this year it has jumped to the highest level I have ever known, pushed by the "FridaysforFuture" School Climate Strikes, the Climate Emergency Movement, the Green New Deal, and Extinction Rebellion. The term climate emergency is now being used widely, and there is growing understanding that we are also in an ecological emergency.

When I ponder the future of the climate movement, my thoughts are informed by three lessons:

- That it is wrong to sweet-talk what's happening: people absolutely need to realize how grim things will be if emissions continue to rise.
- That it is equally essential to talk about the thousand solutions that already exist. When I give a talk, I devote ten minutes to the crisis and fifty to the solutions, using slides to show

photos of solar projects, great cycling cities and electric cars, and data for falling prices that encourage a sense of excitement.

- That the deeper the understanding of the looming catastrophe and the more commanding the understanding of the solutions, the greater is the frustration about how so little is being done, and people's willingness to engage in action.

In the big picture, I believe that we are at the beginning of a Great Transition to a New Ecological Civilization. From my reading of history, a change as great as this moves through twelve stages.

In Stage 1 (Comfort), all is well. There is change, invasion, death, and upheaval (as ever), but the foundations of the civilization are solid. This was the state of the feudal era in Europe in the twelfth century, and of the industrial era in Europe and North America during the 1950s.

In Stage 2 (Crisis), there is such an accumulation of trouble and woe that people snap, and lose belief in the rightness of the era. This happened to feudalism in the eighteenth century, and it is happening to the industrial era right now, prompted by the climate and ecological emergencies and the parallel economic and cultural crises.

In Stage 3 (Emergence), new feelings, values and sentiments emerge. As the feudal era moved into crisis, people wanted to throw off the chains of servitude. As the industrial era moves into crisis, people are wanting to deepen their inner connection with nature and restore a sense of community to the cities, towns, and villages where they live, to heal their increasingly lonely lives.

In Stage 4 (New Ideas), thinkers and philosophers give voice to the new feelings. As the feudal era ended, new ideas emerged around science, inquiry, reason, and individual liberty, finding expression in the Reformation and the Enlightenment. As the industrial era ends, new ideas are emerging around evolutionary theory, consciousness, permaculture, a green economy, the importance of community, and cooperative economic development without dependence on growth.

At every stage, supporters of the old order fight back, using whatever means they can get away with. At the end of the feudal era these included oppression, punishment, exile, and execution.

At the end of the industrial era, they include corporate control of the media, corporate intrusion into universities, the denial of academic advance to new thinkers, and social media trolling.

In Stage 5 (A New Platform), the feelings, values, and ideas give birth to concrete demands for change. At the end of the feudal era it was demands for suffrage, the right to organize, a shorter working week, and (in Europe) the end of slavery. At the end of the industrial era, it is . . . but here the story grows weak, for the platform is weak. The Green New Deal is emerging as an articulated program, but it only addresses one aspect of the fourfold crisis of climate, ecology, economy, and culture. It has add-ons for jobs and justice, but no coherent platform to address the latter three crises. The exception is in Europe, where European Spring, inspired by Yanis Varoufakis, has assembled a cohesive and integrated proposal for a [Green New Deal](#).

Meanwhile, supporters of the old order continue to fight back, using personal attacks, vilification, and the exploitation of public ignorance to undermine and mock new ideas and proposals.

In Stage 6 (Mass Movement), people mobilize around the new feelings, values, ideas and platforms, and they form a mass movement. At the beginning of the industrial age, mass movements broke out in the French Revolution, the Chartists, the socialist movements for workers' rights, and the suffragettes movement. At the end of the industrial age and the beginning of the new ecological civilization, mass movements broke out to demand nuclear disarmament, civil rights, environmental action, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and most recently, climate action.

In Stage 7 (New Political Parties), people step up to become political leaders and form new parties to advance a new platform, however weak and ill-prepared it may be. At the start of the industrial era in Europe, it was liberal parties that carried the torch for change, in opposition to conservative parties. Later, communist and social democratic parties joined the fray. As the industrial era fades away and we approach a new ecological civilization, the Green Party has arisen. In America, trapped in a flawed and corrupted two-party system, social democratic leaders with strong green leanings are attempting to win control of the Democratic Party.

In Stage 8 (A New Story), the new feelings, values, and ideas merge with the hopes the new parties provide to create a new story, providing inspiration for the future. In the industrial era, the new story was one of mechanical, material, and economic progress, involving the domination of nature, and of people who lacked the weaponry to resist. London's Great Exhibition of 1851 was a powerful expression of it, with people flocking from all over Britain and abroad to gaze at the new technologies and be amazed. The same hope was experienced at the World Fair in Chicago in 1893. Another new story also appeared, promising a socialist workers' paradise.

As the industrial era ends, a coherent new story is emerging that tells of a new ecological civilization, and everything this promises. It is far from common currency, however, and in the absence of a new story, many more people fear that the future will bring dystopia and the collapse of civilization altogether.

In Stage 9 (A Cohesive Platform), the new parties develop cohesive platforms of policies and ideas that can usher in the new era. In France, such a new platform arose with the French Revolution. In Britain, delayed by fears of a similar revolution, the change began in the 1840s with the repeal of laws upholding the landed aristocrats, the opening of markets to free trade, and the development of modern banking.

Today, a cohesive platform has yet to emerge that includes the economy and culture as well as the environment. Even most climate activists have very little sense of what is needed to tackle the crisis, let alone also embracing the other three crises that face us as the industrial age winds its way toward the grave—the ecological crisis, the economic crisis, and the cultural crisis. Some of the new economic policies being floated by progressive politicians are necessary corrections to the failing neoliberal economy, but they are not yet a cohesive platform that can inspire hope in the possibility of overcoming our many troubles and creating a new ecological civilization. As Buckminster Fuller once said, "You never change things by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete."

In Stage 10 (A New Government), the new political parties develop full-spectrum platforms that give expression to the new story. They bolster faith in a future that is positive and hopeful; they win elections and they form governments. As the industrial era developed, social democratic parties won elections and formed governments in many European nations and communists seized power in Russia. As we prepare to enter a new ecological civilization, we have yet to reach this stage—but it may be only five or ten years away. Somewhere soon, a country is going to elect a government whose politicians grasp the full vision of a new ecological civilization.

In Stage 11 (New Practices and Behavior), behaviors change both from below, driven by changing values and ideas, and from above, driven by government law and regulation. As the industrial era gives way to a new ecological civilization, change has already begun on a voluntary basis, led by visionary farmers, foresters, architects, engineers, economists, urban designers, and so many others.

In Stage 12 (Comfort), the new era becomes the norm and a stable culture builds around it. There are places where people living in cohousing projects, ecovillages, organic farms, and sustainable urban communities are already experiencing this comfort, even while they fear danger and collapse in the world around them. Our reality, because of the dynamics of the climate crisis, is that even once we have achieved the transition, it will take several hundred years for climate stability to return. While our descendants may be able to enjoy the delights of a new ecological civilization, it will be many generations before nature is restored and the damage healed.

What does this tell us about the next steps for the climate movement? We are between Stages 6 (mass movement) and 7 (new political parties), while ahead of us are Stages 8 (a compelling new story) and 9 (cohesive policies). Implicit in this analysis is my belief that the climate crisis is just one expression of the larger crisis, bringing the end of the industrial age and the choice between collapse into misery or the birth of something new.

I have always held that a powerful vision is a much stronger motivator for change than fear of disaster, but for years, I have watched climate activists dwell mainly on the disaster, not on the promise of a future beyond fossil fuels. When Al Gore released *The Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, the entire film was about the looming crisis, and possible solutions were only featured as the credits ran.

All of our energy comes from the sun. For 300,000 years, we captured it through firewood. For 300 years, we captured it through fossil fuels. Now that we are making the transition, for the next billion years (until we have to evacuate the planet) we will be able to capture it directly, and every year, the efficiency of solar technology will improve and costs will fall. The solar age we are entering will last three million times longer than the geologically miniscule age of fossil fuels.

When I drive our electric car, it feels like the way cars should always have been. It is so smooth and easy, without the clunkiness of gears, exhaust, and engine noise. When I enter a passive house that needs no heating, I think this is what all homes should be like. When I work in an organic garden with no pesticides and nature in harmony with the farm, I think this is how all farms should be.

So what should the next stage of the climate movement be? Increased anger, resistance, and determination; increased exposure of the corporate fossil fuel leaders who are trying to confuse people and destroy the rationality of science; continued exposure of banks that still invest in fossil fuels; increased urging of people to switch banks and investment funds; continued pressure on colleges, foundations, states, and pension funds to divest from fossil fuels.

Alongside all this, we need new strength of vision, and a clear understanding of how we can build a new ecological civilization, in love with Nature and the Earth. We need stunning new movies to portray life in such a civilization, to make Hollywood's fetish with dystopia seem so yesterday.

And we need to pay close attention to how our economies must also change, right down to their erroneous neoclassical assumptions and their erroneous models that can only measure value by price and economic growth, not by anything more, and which actually have the nerve to discount the future. From my experience, most people in the climate movement know as little about economics as most economists know about the climate.

More love, more anger, more passion, more people running for elected office, more resistance to every fossil fuel project and pipeline, and more determination to overcome this massive civilizational crisis, and build us a new ecological civilization.

About the Author



Guy Dauncey, an author and ecofuturist, works to develop a positive vision of a sustainable future, and to translate that vision into action. He is the founder of the British Columbia Sustainable Energy Association, and the author or co-author of ten books, including *The Climate Challenge: 101 Solutions to Global Warming* and *Journey to the Future: A Better World Is Possible*. He is an Honorary Member of the Planning Institute of British Columbia, a Fellow of the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, and a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts.

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Cite as Guy Dauncey, "Charting How We Get There," a contribution to the forum *The Climate Movement: What's Next?*, *Great Transition Initiative* (June 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/climate-movement-dauncey>.

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