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Imploding the Carbon Economy

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

Gus Speth

I greatly admire and agree with Bill McKibben's opening contribution to this forum. I have followed him into jail and would do so again, and agreeing with him in many contexts has proven graciously easy. I do want to lay out here my version of the case for systemic change. These comments are written from a US perspective, where our particularly virulent system of corporatist, consumerist capitalism highlights the imperative of deep change.

“System Change, Not Climate Change”?

Whatever gains can be made working within the current US system (and they can and must be considerable), lasting success will require transformations away from the following:

- An unquestioning commitment to economic growth at essentially any cost, including the costs of climate disruption;
- A measure of that growth, GDP (Grossly Distorted Picture), that includes as positives such negatives as fossil industry growth, the costs of coping with climate change's effects, and much else;
- Powerful corporate interests whose overriding objective is to generate profit, including from avoiding the costs of the climate change they cause, and to expand;
- Markets that systematically fail to recognize costs imposed on the environment unless corrected by government;

- Government that is both subservient to corporate interests and deeply wedded to GDP growth;
- Runaway consumerism spurred on endlessly by sophisticated advertising and gross disparities in status and lifestyle; and
- Social injustice, economic insecurities, and concentrations of wealth so vast that they paralyze effective political action.

The United States will never be able to go far enough, or fast enough, doing the right things on climate, as long as our systemic priorities are ramping up GDP, growing corporate profits, increasing the incomes of the already well-to-do, neglecting the half of America that is just getting by, feeding runaway consumerism, focusing only on the present moment, facilitating great bastions of corporate power, helping abroad only modestly or not at all, and so on. As the Tellus Institute has put it, progress in the current system is not impossible, but it is like struggling up a very fast down escalator.

It is not hard to sketch out policy and other initiatives that fundamentally alter the key features of the current system (see, e.g., my *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy*). But it is hard to bring about real change in the prevailing order. And that is going to require a resounding YES in answer to question three of this forum (“Do we need a meta-movement?”): we desperately need a fusion of progressive forces, one that is prepared at this late date to risk everything.

*Scorn, rage, and many actions:
protests coming round the world.
Today we see but a fraction
of banners yet to be unfurled!*

I do not see an inherent conflict between reformist and transformative actions, nor between problem-solving focused on particular goals and cross-cutting initiatives aimed at structural change. It is all going to be needed to move steadily through the stages of transformation while overcoming the many obstacles between where we are and new systems of political economy dedicated to the well-being of human and natural communities. Large opportunities for climate

mitigation are available in the current system. It is vital to seize them where they exist, which today in the US is most often at the state and local levels. Moving to 100% renewables can be achieved in ways that further energy democracy. Own your own utility! Local finance decisions can be done in ways that cut out big for-profit banks. Move your money (from Wall Street)! New climate-related infrastructure and other investments can be done in ways that increase economic security and reduce family vulnerability as well as lead to the burgeoning of new enterprise types such as worker-owned co-ops, municipal companies, profit-not for profit hybrids, and public trusts. Good jobs for all!

I have worked on the climate issue since I was in the Carter White House in the late 1970s, when we issued several reports calling for climate action. These forty years without effective action are the greatest dereliction of civic responsibility in the history of the republic. The world will pay a large price for it. It is hard for me to approach optimism without my guard up. Still, something is happening here today. The level of public, media and political attention is not nearly where it should be, but there some hopeful signs of movement in the right directions. Leading climate scientist Joachim Schellnhuber has said that “we need something really disruptive, which I would call an induced implosion of the carbon economy.” He is on the right track. Our job is to make it happen, using all the tools we have.

About the Author



Gus Speth is an Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute and co-chair of the Next System Project at the Democracy Collaborative. He has served as a professor at Vermont Law School and Georgetown University Law School, as well as Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. From 1993 to 1999, Speth was Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and chair of the UN Development Group. Prior to his service at the UN, he was founder of the World Resources Institute, chairman of the US Council on Environmental Quality in the Carter Administration, and co-founder of the National Resources Defense Council. He currently serves on the boards of the New Economy Coalition, the Center for a New American Dream, and the Climate Reality Project. He is the author, co-author, or editor of seven books, including *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy* and *Angels by the River*.

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