

RICHARD: More than 40 years ago, environmental activist and author Bill McKibben was among the very first thinkers to warn the public about the perils of climate change and the damage that human activity is causing. Former Republican Congressman Bob Inglis became a climate activist much later, but he's still no less passionate. Both men differ on politics, but they agree on the goal of sharply reducing carbon emissions as quickly as possible. Next, we hear from them. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies. Co-host Ashley Milne-Tyte is away this week. Bob Inglis is a conservative Republican and a committed believer in free enterprise capitalism and limited government. He's executive director of RepublicEN.org, a conservative group that advocates for solutions to climate change. Bill McKibben is a writer and teacher who has dedicated his life to stopping the climate crisis. He's written a dozen books about the environment, is a distinguished scholar at Middlebury College and the leader of the climate action campaign, 350.org. Last year, Bill launched another campaign, Third Act, which is aimed at engaging activists over the age of 60 on climate, democracy, and other issues. Here's our interview.

Bill McKibben and Bob Inglis, thanks very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

BOB: It's a pleasure to be with you both.

BILL: Yes, great to be with you.

RICHARD: Let's start where you both agree, climate change. First, Bill, tell us why you think it's such an urgent threat.

BILL: Well, climate change is the biggest thing that human beings have ever done, and by a order of magnitude. I wrote the first book about what we now climate change, we then called the Greenhouse Effect, back in 1989. Even then, it was pretty clear it was going to be a dramatic turn in human history. And all that's happened in the decades since has made it clear that scientists were absolutely right. Indeed, as scientists usually are, they were conservative in their predictions, and things are happening faster and on a larger scale than we would've guessed. Already, we've seen the planet's temperature increase about one degree Celsius, so almost two degrees Fahrenheit.

That doesn't necessarily sound like so much, so put it in different units. Every day, the heat that we trap near the climate as a result of the carbon that we've put in the air by burning fossil fuel is the heat equivalent of about 400,000 Hiroshima-sized bombs. That helps explain how we could've melted most of the sea ice in the summer Arctic, how we could've begun to dramatically raise the levels of the ocean, how we could've upended the hydrological cycle of the planet, amplifying both drought and flood in place after place after place. We're still fairly near the beginning of this saga. On current paths, we're going to increase the temperature of the planet three degrees Celsius, five, six degrees Fahrenheit before the century is out, and if we do that, we will not have civilizations like the ones we're used to having.

RICHARD: Bob, your concerns about climate change, how do you see it?

BOB: All those things that Bill just said are true, and here's another thing that's interesting about climate change. It can be solved, which is what's so different about it as opposed to some other issues. Healthcare, for example, the problem is there's a 100% death rate, and there's a lot of suffering between here and there. So there's no such thing as the perfect healthcare system. But climate change, we know what's causing it, and it can be solved. Now, it doesn't mean that some of the damage isn't baked in.

We've, to use another healthcare analogy, we've been smoking for a good number of years now, since the Industrial Revolution. But doctors will tell you, if you're smoking cigarettes, stop. No matter how many years you've been smoking, it'll help you at the margins. So the damage is baked in from all those years of smoking, and we will have sea level rise, and we will have all the things that are happening now, even in more intensity.

RICHARD: Bill McKibben, you agree with that, right?

BILL: Bob is absolutely right here. We can stop it, and it's really been a remarkable story of scientists and engineers doing what they do and doing it well. It dropped the price of solar power and wind power and the batteries to store this stuff 90% in the last decade. It's now the cheapest way to generate power that there is on the planet, and we know the technologies to use to take advantage of that electricity. We know that EVs and E-bikes work better than the internal combustion car you've been driving your whole life. We know that you don't have to have a campfire in your kitchen anymore because you can get rid of your range and replace it with conduction cooktop, which not only cuts the amount of energy you use, it also reduces, dramatically, the chance that your kid's going to get asthma from breathing all the smoke that you're putting in your kitchen at the moment.

RICHARD: New technologies such as heat pumps, solar panels, and induction stoves is expensive, especially for individuals. What about the economic consequences for society as a whole?

BILL: If we do it, it will save us money. A huge study from Oxford last year that said that the rapid transition to renewable energy would save tens of trillions of dollars over the next few decades simply because, although it takes money to put that stuff up, you no longer have to go and dig some more coal every day to toss in it. Once you've built the solar panel, once you've paid to put it up, the sun delivers the energy for free every morning when it rises above the horizon.

RICHARD: Bob, speak to that. You're a free market guy. Bill has mentioned a number of innovations, some of which have come from the private sector. What is the potential for innovation in helping to limit the devastating impacts of climate change?

BOB: I think it's huge. What it takes, we think at RepublicEN.org, is just making us all fully accountable for all of the costs associated with burning fossil fuels. If you bring that

accountability, then good things happen because then consumers start seeing that clean is actually cheaper, and dirty made accountable is expensive. So, given the choice, they'll typically choose cheaper, but right now, what happens is we allow people to belch and burn into the trash dump of the sky with no accountability, filling up the trash dump. It's sort of like your city, they charge for the space the trash haulers take up in that city dump. It's a tipping fee. We do that on fossil fuels, and all kinds of good things happen, and the main thing that would happen, too, is that we could make that so that the whole world follows our lead through a carbon border adjustment, which we think is really the most important thing to focus on because this is a worldwide problem.

Climate change is caused by emissions anywhere. So we've got to figure out a way to get the world in. We can do that, we think, by collecting that carbon tax on goods as they come in to the U.S. if they don't have a carbon tax on their own goods. And then it causes the world to follow our lead, which would be very exciting. We, by the way, are getting ready to start following the EU's lead because they're going to probably get there before we do on this.

RICHARD: Bob, as the name of your nonprofit suggests, you're a committed Republican, and yet, among many environmentalists, Republicans are the problem, with many Conservatives calling the climate change emergency a hoax. Talk about why your fellow Conservatives should support action, why it's in their own self-interest.

BOB: Well, the good news is it's changing. When I was tossed out of Congress in 2010, it was against the orthodoxy to say that climate change is real. But that's really changed with one big exception, and that's Donald Trump, and he is a big exception. But other folks in the Republican Party have figured out that, hey, the future is in acting on climate change because young Conservatives want to act on climate change just like young Progressives do. So people like Kevin McCarthy see that polling data. They know that those young Conservatives are coming. What he's trying to do is figure out how you get around Donald Trump because that's the problem for him.

My metaphor is the river is going to flow. We're going to act on climate change. The only question is whether we act soon enough to avoid the worst consequences. But the problem is there's a rock in the river, and it's got a red hat on it. Certainly, we're going to act. It's just will we act soon enough?

RICHARD: Bill, do you see complacency about the impact of climate change as mostly a problem on the Right, or is it also something that many Democrats have to get their head around?

BILL: I don't think complacency is a problem, at least for environmentalists and scientists and most Democrats. There's 49 Democratic votes now for a bill in the Congress that would put a lot of money to work doing what we need to do, pushing, because Bob's analysis about a carbon tax makes sense. The problem is that we've waited so long that we can no longer... there's no model that shows we can get out of this trouble with that alone in the time that we have because Bob is correct. Time is the really difficult variable here. We've got very short order

in which to act before we pass ticking points that will make future progress impossible. And I don't think that Donald Trump is the main sticking point here. The rock here doesn't have a red hat on top. It has a Exxon Mobil sign and a Chevron sign on top, and it's players like that that have systematically, over decades turned the Republican Party into an enemy of progress on this.

Our biggest oil and gas barons in this country are the Kochs, who own an enormous amount of refining and pipelining capacity, and they used their winnings to become by far the biggest donors to the Republican Party over the years and, in the process, turn it from a party that once had worked with at least some rigor on environmental issues into a just implacable opponent. I admire Bob's endless optimism, but making Kevin McCarthy your hope for courageous vision for the future strikes me as the slenderest of reads.

RICHARD: Bob, I have to let you respond to that.

BOB: Well, it's just I believe in redemption. Look at my own record. I was like Exxon Mobil. Exxon Mobil funded the denial machine. I spent six years in Congress saying, "Climate change is nonsense." I didn't know anything about it except that Al Gore was for it. That's pretty ignorant, but that's the way it was my first six years. Out six years, came back for another six with a different affect after quite a metamorphosis. I'm sort of the chairman of the redeemed group. So I believe that people can change.

BILL: I believe people can change, too. That's always a good thing to think, but just in being really accurate here, you're not only the chairman of the redeemed group, at least as far as Republican congressman go, you're most of the membership, too.

BOB: That's how I got elected.

BILL: There's fewer numbers of the Republican caucus willing to take action on climate change than there were when you were around because the few that have stuck their heads above the parapet have suffered the same fate that you have.

BOB: Yeah, but you should know, though... let me just differ with you there about... I do chair an unusual little group of people who maybe want to go all the way into this substantial carbon tax that is revenue neutral and is border adjustable so that it goes worldwide. That's true. Relatively small fraternity there, so therefore I can probably win the election as chairman of it. But among current members of Congress, there is this caucus now, the Climate Solutions Caucus that John Curtis of Utah is chairing, and it's 73, 75 members now. Not all of those people are really quite committed to climate action, but there are some who are, and not all of them would go as far as I would go with what I believe to be the thing that really moves things rapidly and goes worldwide. Some of them are incrementalists. They want to do better wind and solar subsidies. They want to plant a lot of trees. I'm for all those things. We've got to go worldwide, though. That's the key.

RICHARD: You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground, the podcast from Common Ground Committee. We're hearing from Bill McKibben and Bob Inglis. I'm Richard, and Ashley is away this week. Before we continue our interview, I have a favor to ask of you. Listeners, we'd really like to hear your response to our new survey. The answers will help us improve our podcasts and make shows that you really want to hear. Give us your ideas and feedback. The survey is at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts, and there you'll also find all 61 of our podcast episodes.

We also want to tell you about a new podcast. It's called When the People Decide. It's made by the McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State University. When the People Decide is a show about ballot initiatives, the folks who organize them and how they've shaped American democracy. This podcast traces the history of how ballot initiatives have been put together, and there are interviews with the people who made them happen, When the People Decide. Now back to our interview.

Until now, we've been talking about Congress and national politics. What can individual citizens do to put pressure on fossil fuel companies and others who contribute to climate change. Bill, can this yield results?

BILL: Sure, and here's an interesting place that's kind of opened in the course of this year. It's a new study that demonstrates just how important the banking system has become to the production of carbon dioxide because they keep wanting money for the expansion of the fossil fuel industry. This new study demonstrates that both for corporations and for individuals, your bank is probably your largest source of carbon emissions. If you're an individual with \$125,000 in the bank, that produces more carbon than all your flying, cooking, heating, cooling, driving in the course of the year.

RICHARD: Explain that argument. Is that because that cash is being put to work by banks on behalf of fossil fuel corporations?

BILL: You got it. That's what building pipelines, new fracking wells, on and on and on. So that becomes a place where we can put lots of pressure on these players, and we don't require political agreement in Congress to make it happen. For instance, at ThirdAct.org, one of our big campaigns is to get people to agree that they will cut up their credit cards from Chase and Citi and Wells Fargo, and Bank of America at the end of the year unless these guys have begun to shift. This is a campaign that will keep growing. It's like this big divestment campaign that we've run against the fossil fuel companies. We're now at about \$40 trillion in endowments and portfolios that are divested in part or in full from fossil fuels, or as Bob says, markets are powerful movers, but we need to make those markets move if we're going to do that. So this is an excellent place for citizen action for people of all kinds.

RICHARD: Bob, respond to that. What can citizens do, and is part of the solution, as you see it as a committed Republican, to put pressure on companies to behave better?

BOB: I think the best thing citizens can do is bring awareness to conservative lawmakers that, hey, we are a constituency, and we will follow you if you lead on this. That the constituency that's missing, and it just needs to be made visible and audible. Politicians typically follow. They don't lead. So you've got to show them a constituency, but the goal is a worldwide response, and in order to get a worldwide response, we need the indispensable nation, which is the United States, to act. And the only way it's going to act is if Republicans decide to join with Democrats to make it happen. That's what we've got to do. We've got to reach out to people, and it's really somewhat of an evangelistic task, is what we've got here.

BILL: Yeah, and to be clear, there are ways to put big pressure on Wall Street to get banks and things to change their policies. If we do, then it'll produce precisely the kind of global action that Bob is rightly calling for.

RICHARD: Bob, you talked a minute ago about talking points, and I wanted to ask you both about messaging. The threat of a climate disaster has been well publicized. Is there a better way to frame the concern? Does Bob have a point, for instance, in stressing the constructive, the positive, as opposed to warning of doom, which the environmental movement has done for many years.

BILL: Well, no one's warning about the threat of climate disaster. People are just pointing out the climate disasters that are already happening. It was me who pointed out all the possibilities that science and engineering have given us. It's not like these are contrary things. Why wouldn't we just tell the truth about both the pitfalls and the potential that we face? I think, in those ways, Bob and I are very much in alignment.

BOB: I think what we've got to do is... All of us live in Missouri, apparently, the Show Me State, because once you show me things that will work, then I can see it. Bill just mentioned a Tesla, and of course a lot of people would say, "Oh, that's so expensive." Well, wait until the F-150 Lightning shows up on some job site, and the guy pulls open the...What do they call it? They don't call it a trunk. They call it a something else. He plugs in all of his power tools, and he goes to work from his F-150. Watch everybody look around on that job site and say, "Look here, that's thing's working!" And by the way, he didn't pay \$5 a gallon to get there. He charged it last night when the power may have been coming from a nuclear power plant if he's in South Carolina, for example. So it's pretty much emission-less power to charge that F-150.

Show me that it works, and then people can engage. It's always a chicken or the egg thing. When you show me something, then I can engage. Otherwise, I'm just thinking, "Well, we're all going to die next Tuesday. Let's just eat, drink, and be merry if that's the case." So that's what we got to do, is we've got to help people to see that a bright future is coming.

RICHARD: Bill, Bob mentioned nuclear power. Is that part of the solution as well as wind and solar?

BILL: It's part of the solution if you've got a huge amount of money that you'd like to burn. It's an excellent way to do it. Look, we should keep open the nuclear power plants that we've got as long as we can do it with some kind of relative safety, but it's probably not going to be a big part of what we're going to do going forward because, as we said, in the last decade, the price of renewable energy has come down 90%, but the price of nuclear power just keeps going up and up and up.

People keep saying we're not that far away from a generation of small modular reactors that are lower cost and safer and things. If and when they appear, it may change the calculus, but for now, the job is to be frugal and work with the technology we've got on the shelf that we know works. The sun is a wonderful nuclear reactor, and it's at a very safe distance, and we know we can use it economically. So let's use it.

The miracle technology's already here. The cheapest way to make power on our planet is to point a sheet of glass at the sun. We'd be crazy not to be making full use of it, and this is a place where there really is agreement. We're pulling data about solar power, and its appeal is off the charts. It's roughly 80% of Republicans, of Independents, and of Democrats want more government support of solar power so that we can make it happen faster.

RICHARD: Yeah, what about that, Bob? What about getting more government support for the American manufacture of solar panels or at least boosting the solar panel industry more than has been done so far.

BOB: We believe that basically you should just make people accountable for all the cost, and then watch to see what happens rather than have the government picking winners and losers. The challenge that Republicans immediately raise to the solar answer is the intermittency, which is, of course, solved perhaps by batteries, but the sourcing of those materials is where there's a mental block now for many Conservatives in the House and Senate, is they say... For example, one told me recently... It happens to be a Black Republican. He says, "People who look like me dig stuff out of the dirt in Africa. They're 10 years old doing it." In other words, they're terribly abused as they get this stuff out to make our batteries. And he says, "This can't go on."

Basically, what he's putting back to me is, "You solve the intermittency problem." Of course, the solution temporarily is natural gas, not a long-term solution. Perhaps nuclear is that battery that is the intermittency problem. We can't have intermittency. If you're in an emergency room tonight, and the wind hasn't blown enough, and the battery is out, you're in trouble. Here's hoping that we get a lot better batteries that don't have the rare earths that are in such short supply and that are in awkward places to source. If I were still in Congress, that would be a major focus of R&D expenditures, and this is where I maybe differ a bit with Milton Friedman. I would have the government spending a lot of money on that better battery.

First thing to be said is a lot of the rhetoric around intermittency is left over from a decade ago, and the batteries and things have gotten way better. Second thing to be said is, yes, we should definitely try to mine cobalt in some new ways and set up the safeguards to make sure that it

happens. It's worth remembering that 9 million people a year -- that's one death in five -- die from breathing the combustion byproducts of fossil fuel. Fossil fuel is just incredibly deadly stuff. So I think that's the right answer to your congressman who's really worried about the deaths around mining cobalt. They are important to deal with, but they are miniscule in comparison to the number of people killed by the status quo.

The final thing I'd say, I've agreed with a lot of what Bob's had to say. He and I are friends on this. For me, since I'm a Sunday School teacher, one way that I express it, Bob, is to say, at the moment, we're using fuel from hell. We do down and dig, dig, dig deep into the ground, but we've got the possibility now to rely on fuel that comes straight from heaven, that moon and sun that God gave us, every single day. That's where we should be turning our attention just as fast as we can.

RICHARD: Thank you both very much for joining us.

BOB: Great to be with both of you.

BILL: Absolutely.

RICHARD: Bob Inglis and Bill McKibben finding a lot of common ground. Our podcast is produced for Common Ground Committee. I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.