

## **The 2014 Right Livelihood Awards**

### **Acceptance speech by Bill McKibben**

**1 December 2014**

Sue and I are very grateful to join you here today, and very grateful indeed for this award. I accept it on behalf of the burgeoning movement to fight climate change, and in particular my colleagues at 350.org, working in 188 countries to try and limit the damage to our home planet from global warming. I am so thankful not only to the RLA, but also to my fellow honourees for all that their work has meant for the progress of human rights and human potential. As an American, let me give a special note of gratitude to Mr. Snowden, whose remarkable bravery helped all of us understand the forces at work in my nation.

As we meet here today the world is almost done with what will be the hottest calendar year in its recent history. 2014 saw the warmest temperatures – by far – ever recorded in the northern Pacific. It also was the year when we learned, tragically, that the melt of the West Antarctic ice sheet is now irreversible. Twenty-five years ago, when I wrote the first book-length account of this crisis, none of these wounds could have been predicted. But scientists are conservative; the damage has outpaced their forecasts. Every ocean, including the one outside these doors, is now 30% more acidic than a generation ago. Every continent now sees drought and flood on an unprecedented scale. Every scientific body now urges upon us, with ever more desperate rhetoric, the need for action. You will find in your packet, as one concise reminder of the relevant points, a recent publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, outlining once more the grim and by now very plain facts of climate change.

And yet so little action has come. The world will meet again a year from today in Paris to try and reach a treaty – a replay of the meeting that five years ago ended in fiasco in Copenhagen. So far the fossil fuel industry has been powerful enough to

block substantial action in most nations, especially the United States, historically the biggest source of the carbon now overheating the earth.

We in the climate movement have long since concluded that that fountain of fossil fuel money – which buys politicians and spreads disinformation – can only be met if we coin our own currency: in this case, the currency of movements. Passion, spirit, creativity. Sometimes we need to spend the currency of our bodies and head to jail. And so here's the good news to temper that bleak weather forecast: all over the world that movement is finally rising. In late September, 400,000 people filled the streets of New York to demand the UN take action on climate; that was the largest demonstration about anything in the U.S. for some years, and those people were joined by protesters in 2,600 other cities around the world. The world's first truly global problem is seeing the world's first truly global movement.

And it is beginning to have an effect. That same night in New York, the heirs to the Rockefeller fortune announced they were divesting their holdings in fossil fuel companies – the first family of fossil fuel was selling its oil stock. In so doing, they joined institutions from Stanford University to the Church of Sweden. (And hopefully soon the City of Stockholm, and many others in this green-minded nation.) Just as 30 years ago, when the question was apartheid in South Africa, the world's people are coming together to withdraw their money from the companies that simply refuse to change their practices. Those companies – Exxon, Shell, Chevron, Gazprom, China Coal, BP, and all the rest – have in their combined reserves far more carbon than the world's scientists say we can safely burn. And yet those companies have told their shareholders and their banks that they will dig up that coal and oil and gas and burn it. If they carry out those business plans, there is no mystery how the story ends: the planet breaks.

And so we must fight, peacefully but firmly. We must build green cities – and like so many others I have visited Stockholm's green neighborhood, Hammarby Sjostad. It is a model of what the future could look like, as congenial as it is

ecological. But beautiful as that vision is, we can't be taking one step forward and another back. In this city, for instance, planning continues on a massive highway, the Forbifart Stockholm; ask yourself whether in a decade or two that is the legacy this planet needs, or whether a sharp and dramatic move towards public transit and car sharing, the kind of clever public transport that Helsinki now envisions, might not be better.

And ask yourself sharp questions about trying to make every possible penny off the current situation: if Vattenfall, for instance, simply sells its stake in German lignite mines, there is no question that that coal will eventually be dug up and burned. Is not the really responsible course – for a nation that grew wealthy in part by burning fossil fuel – to make the small economic sacrifice and keep that coal forever underground where it can do no harm? Is that any different than what, for instance, we've asked of the Brazilians when it comes to the Amazon?

And we very badly need Sweden's cities and national governments to follow the lead of the Church of Sweden and divest from fossil fuel holdings: We simply must defeat those forces that want to delay large-scale change so they can have a decade or two more profit. There's no ducking that fight: If you invest in fossil fuel companies, you profit from the destruction of the earth. That's the definition of dirty money. Those who invest in fossil fuel companies are making a wager that the world will do nothing to combat climate change. That's an immoral wager.

And it's an unwise one as well, because civil society really is rising up. I am reminded of the iconic scene earlier this autumn, when our 350.org colleagues in the endangered islands of the Pacific took their traditional canoes to the largest coal port in the world, Newcastle in Australia, and used them to block some of the largest ships in the world. Their slogan was, "We're Not Drowning, We're Fighting." I am reminded of the scenes in North America, where cattle ranchers and Native Americans formed an unprecedented Cowboy-Indian Alliance to block the Keystone Pipeline and its cargo of filthy oil from the tarsands of Canada. We

stand in solidarity with Andean activists losing the glaciers that supply their drinking water, and with Bangladeshi activists watching the seas rise in the Bay of Bengal. We learn from African leaders like Desmond Tutu who recently called climate change the greatest human rights challenge of our time, and from Sami leaders from the top of the world who are watching berserk winter weather wreck time-honored ways of life. We struggle alongside residents of Delhi and Beijing and the other smog-choked metropolises of our planet, for we know that their children die from the same fossil fuel combustion that endangers the whole earth.

Global warming is a test for all of us – *the* test, in our time on earth. It's a test, in a sense, of whether the big brain is a good adaptation after all. Clearly it can get us in a lot of trouble – but maybe, just maybe, it's attached to a big enough heart to get us out of some of that trouble too. I can't promise you we will win this struggle – we've waited a long time to get started, and the science is quite dark. But I can promise you that in every corner of the world we will fight, and fight hard. Thank you so much for helping spread word of that struggle with this great honour.