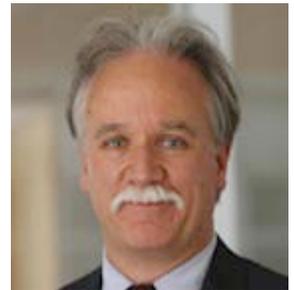


Igniting moral courage through The Climate Reality Project

An interview with Kevin Curtis, Chief Program and Advocacy Officer, The Climate Reality Project



As Chief Program & Advocacy Officer at The Climate Reality Project, Kevin Curtis' responsibilities include managing the implementation of the programmatic and advocacy aspects of The Climate Reality Project's various initiatives and campaigns. When Kevin first joined the organisation in June 2009, he was responsible for managing its involvement in and leadership of the coalition campaign to pass climate legislation through Congress. Prior to joining The Climate Reality Project, Kevin gained a decade of leadership experience in senior roles in the environmental advocacy movement. Most recently, Kevin served as Deputy Director of the Pew Environment Group, where he was responsible for campaign operations as well as the global warming and U.S. public lands campaigns. Kevin also served as Senior Vice President for Programs at the National Environmental Trust (NET), a multi-issue environmental advocacy and communications organisation. Originally from Colorado, Kevin has several decades of experience in Washington D.C. where he has developed a solid grounding in the substance and politics of energy policy among other environmental and scientific issues.

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Interviewer: John Wiseman

JW: Could you begin by giving a short summary of the key aims of the Climate Reality Project?

KC: The Climate Reality Project was founded six years ago by our Chairman, Al Gore. It was founded on the heels of the success of his movie *An Inconvenient Truth*. It's his philanthropic effort in the space of climate advocacy. He pursues climate solutions in a variety of ways, but we were his philanthropic part. Even though the organisation is only six years old, it's important to note that we've had three different parts to our life and we're in the third right now.

The best way to think about it is that the first phase of the Alliance was 2007/08. This was prior to the election of President Obama and was the last two years of the Bush administration. There was no legislative or presidential push for national climate legislation, so the organisation was small. It was based in California and focused on building public education; about how we can work together to solve the climate crisis.

One of our most famous products from that era was the television ad that had Nancy Pelosi and Newt Gingrich sitting on the couch saying 'we don't agree on much, but we agree on the need to solve climate.' That was Phase One.

Phase Two came about due to the election of President Obama and the subsequent desire of the President, Speaker Pelosi and others including Rep. Henry Waxman, to pass comprehensive climate legislation quickly. In response to this legislative opportunity, the organisation was re-tooled and moved to Washington D.C. and was a leader of, and a major contributor to, a large collaborative effort by the climate advocacy community to support and pass legislation.

So over the next 18-24 months the organisation grew to a staff of 250. We aggressively supported the Waxman-Markey comprehensive climate legislation in the House; and the efforts to secure corresponding legislation in the Senate. The necessary goal was 60 votes. I think we came in at – though there was never a formal vote - at 57 Senate supporters, so we were close, but not close enough. That was Phase Two.

Phase Three is essentially, if you will, a blending of Phase One and Two, where we have returned to public education about the realities of the climate crisis and the building of political will; but doing it with an eye towards bringing the pendulum back and passing climate legislation.

As of now, in 2012, our policy goals remain the same as before - they never wavered. They are the adoption of national legislation and ultimately an international agreement. In terms of national legislation we have two parts of our policy goals. Part A is the abolition of as many subsidies for fossil fuel as possible.

Part B is the adoption of national legislation that puts a cap or price on carbon in order to bring down the use of carbon-based fuels by capturing more of the costs to society, which will make it more expensive and lead to the development of alternatives and get carbon emissions coming down.

In terms of a strategy to achieve these goals, we firmly believe that a committed and vocal minority in the American population can bring about the change we need.

The Climate Reality Project organisation is focused on enabling, empowering, connecting, strengthening that vocal minority in the US to bring about change. We apply the same model internationally, but our priority is in the US; both due to the size of the economy and the emissions and that's where we are physically located

So we're pursuing the energising of the vocal minority to bring about change by focusing on two messages to reach that target audience.

The first message is "connecting the dots." It's really just trying to make climate change as real to people as possible in their everyday lives. It's not this theoretical thing that will happen in the future; it's happening now. The emissions have gone up now, the climate's changing, the impacts are happening. Severe weather is probably the best example of that impact and the way to make the connections.

The second area of message focus for us is on trying to undercut the power of the opposition. One of the challenges of this fight is there's a very well entrenched status quo that's taken 150 years to build. On one level, it's a wonderful status quo. It's why we have power and electricity and air conditioning in our homes; but it's a fossil fuel based energy system and to solve this crisis we have to adopt a non-fossil fuel based solution.

So we try to point out that there's an entrenched economic self interest that is behind much of the confusion or delay or obfuscation on this issue. We try to use humour, satire and amusement, because it's too strong a foe to take on head on. If we can chip away at their credibility, then they're less effective.

JW: There are some assumptions underpinning that strategy about political obstacles. Can you say a bit more about your analysis, about the key obstacles to action both in the US and globally at the moment?

KC: Yes we believe the key obstacle is lack of political will, lack of public support. I certainly experienced the lack of that intensity during the legislative fight, when we were up on the Hill trying to promote legislation. You could sense that the public supports it, but not intensely. So we're trying to build that public support and public will for action now. That's assumption one.

Assumption two is that building that political will in the United States will take many different approaches, many different messages, as well as different messengers. One of Mr Gore's favourite lines is 'it will take a symphony not a solo'. We see ourselves as a key part of that symphony. But our part of the symphony is, as I said earlier, to really focus on the people who already believe climate change is happening, but just aren't sufficiently motivated.

Let me read our Mission statement to you... 'The Climate Reality Project is dedicated to revealing the complete truth about the climate crisis, in a way that ignites the moral courage in each of us'. So that's what we're trying to do.

JW: You talked about a symphony, not just a solo and therefore a range of audiences that you're trying to impact. But there must be some key priorities. Who would be at the top of the list?

KC: There are. I don't know if you're familiar with the Yale-George Mason Universities' Six Americas study on Climate Change? Our audience is in the first two categories of the six groups they use – which are 'the alarmed' and 'the concerned' – which together include approximately 25-30% of the American public. One of the things we've discovered as we started analysing that demographic, is that all walks of American life are included in that 20-30% who are most concerned about climate change.

You would presume, or I would presume, that these two demographic groups would be heavy to Democrats, heavy to environmental group members. While true; it's equally true that every demographic of current day America is included in the 30% or so of Americans who are very alarmed or concerned about climate change.

There are retired CEOs, existing CEOs of utilities, there are faith leaders, there are middle-aged white guys like me, there are young kids, there are people of colour...Probably the only group that's not really statistically present in these first two categories are the most conservative part of American society, the Tea Party members if you will. They're not there, but every other major demographic segment is.

So our focus is to find those people from all different walks of life and connect them. That's our communication strategy. Some people answer youth, some people will answer 'blue states'. We want to find all the people who are most concerned about climate change and connect them and activate them.

JW: There's a debate about the extent to which information and evidence is a fundamentally critical part of achieving that aim; or whether that's insufficient and that there are other key messages that are important as well. What's your view about the balance there?

KC: My personal view is that providing good information about the reality of climate change is an essential but insufficient piece of the communication and education effort. For much of the debate and particularly the demographic groups we are focusing on, they already know it's a problem. What they need to be armed with

and supported on is how to go win the conversation; how to make the case to their neighbours, to their friends, to their grandparents, to their grumpy uncle who talks about sunspots at Thanksgiving dinner.

Then I think it's really trying to connect people with each other. So they draw their strength from each other, get a sense of a community and really arm themselves with the internal belief that they can change the conversation. Because I think at the end of the day, what we're really talking about is building a movement. Because in order to de-carbonise the American economy and the world economy in the timeframe we need it to happen; it's not an evolutionary change.

It's a very revolutionary change which will take a movement and a commitment to solving it...The good news is that there's a wealth of solutions out there that accommodate and need varying and different approaches. But what's lacking is the political will to pursue those solutions. And that's what we're focused on generating.

JW: Can I ask you a question about timing and urgency? When some people say to you “yes, there are a wealth of solutions. Yes, there are promising signs. But perhaps unlike any other issue, this is an issue where time is of the essence.” And indeed there are people who, say, given the extent of climate change already locked in and the extent of emissions already locked in, some people use the phrase ‘too late’. What’s your response to that kind of criticism or concern?

KC: I think it's easy to wallow and get stuck in the 'it's too late' category, but that doesn't solve the problem. As I think about the future of the world, I think about the future of the world through my eyes and through the eyes of my children. We have to solve this problem and the sooner we solve it the less damage will be caused by the change in climate. So sure, it would have been great to have solved it 30 years ago, but it's better to solve it in the next 20 years than to wait another 50 years. So that's how I think – I think that's the mindset we bring.

JW: I'd be interested also in your reflections on the state of play in relation to key decision makers in the United States. The state, if you like, of the broader mainstream political debate. How would you summarise that at the moment and what do you think are the prospects over the next few years?

KC: I think the American political system's a mess. The good news, if you will, is that that's not new news. I think there are some new factors contributing to the mess such as the role of money in elections. But if you look at American history...Congress has rarely been a beacon of leadership. Look at the civil rights movement. The country was way way ahead of the Congress. The southern lock on committee chairs in Congress meant that 25 senators from the south could block any meaningful legislation on civil rights, well into the 60s.

But the way they were defeated was to finally build enough political will in the system so that President Johnson and President Kennedy before him found a way around it. I think that's the same situation we're building. So I think that Congress will be the last people - the last piece to fall into place.

One of the criticisms that I make of myself and of the environmental community at large on climate, is that for the last 5 or 10 years we've been too focused on an 'inside the beltway - top down solution'. It is a strategy where we've started with what was possible – that is, what was possible in Congress given its make-up and the influence of the fossil fuel industry. I think that's a guaranteed way to not get there. Instead, we need to really build the political support and public demand for action now. Then we can figure out how to get as much through the Congress as fast as possible.

JW: Turning to the global story...There are also those who say - particularly post Copenhagen - that a reliance on the global governance system to achieve significant change is unwise. What's your assessment of the state of play in relation to global governance on climate change?

KC: I think as dysfunctional as the American political system is...I think you could say the world governance system is equally dysfunctional – dysfunctional is too harsh a term – equally unlikely to lead to success. So again, I think that the bottom up approach is what takes place there. Lots of very capable, very bright people have mapped out how this can happen. What they're all lacking - from the current Secretary General of the UN, to the current predecessors, to Tim Wirth at the UN Foundation – what they're lacking is not a path; but they're lacking the political support for it.

So I think in the same way we are proposing in the US; we're going to build political support and demand for action, bottom up. I think that globally you do it too and instead of focusing on demographic groups within the U.S., you focus on key countries around the world. You start with bilateral agreements, regional agreements, and building pressure inside key countries including the large emitters to take action. That will then lead to the next generation of international agreements, rather than crafting it in these 168 country meetings that demand consensus. That will not get us there.

JW: Can I ask you a question about the relationship between technological and economic solutions? One of the comments that a wide range of the people I've been speaking to have made is that if you summarise the two or three key aspects of the solution, it's clearly going to be about energy efficiency. It's clearly going to be about transition from fossil fuels to renewables and it may well also require some shift in aggregate demand for resources and energy.

There is a view that says that even on the most optimistic of assessments - energy efficiency and renewables still won't be the full answer. Therefore, some reassessment of aggregate demand will also be important. Do you have a view on that?

KC: I think that sort of dissection can often be a political trap, because the other side will say 'ah ha – I knew it - you want to prohibit the developing world from having the same living standards as the existing developed world'. Or 'it's a socialist plot to bring us down and stand in the way of capitalism and American growth'. The way I prefer to answer that sort of question is that as we engage in solving this crisis, as people really unlock the technology, grasp the scale of the problem and what's needed to solve it, people will start making changes in their personal behaviour that make sense to them.

It's nothing forced on them; it's just as they truly recognise that if we are to produce energy in the same way that we have for the previous 150 years and we all want to live the way Americans do, or Western Europeans, or choose your favourite developed country; is that would take the equivalent of three earths – the resources of three earths. We only have one earth and we all need to live in this together; but that doesn't mean we all have to live in mud huts. It means we have to re-imagine what a world of seven plus billion people looks like in a carbon-constrained economy. I personally am convinced that it looks like a wonderful world. It has lots of potential that we haven't yet imagined.

JW: When you look around the world, or indeed the United States, at other organisations, initiatives, agencies, movements that you find particularly inspiring, innovative, creative – working in the same space – who you would draw on for inspiration? For example, which organisations do you feel are the most interesting and creative? Who is providing the benchmarks I suppose?

KC: That's a great question and I'm going to give you an answer that – doesn't directly answer your question and maybe it's a reflective of my grey hair. I think increasingly it's organisations and efforts led by people under the age of 40. Led by people who aren't Washington hands the way I am; who are really re-imagining what the world looks like and have grown up with the current generation of technology and the current economic situation and are really making very different decisions about what's important to them, how they live their lives, how they work business, what it means to do business.

I think that points you to the next generation or the next evolution of what a market economy looks like. Markets are very efficient and yet people are finding limits to that drive for efficiency and they want other things. So I think there isn't one benchmark out there, but I get a sense that there is a fun combination of realism and "thinking out of the box" by many people who I associate with being under 40 that will bring about this evolution in the marketplace and economy. On my good days I like to think that I'm kind of thinking like them, but on my bad days I know I'm not.

JW: **Can you identify any examples of the kind of organisation or the kind of initiative you've got in mind there?**

KC: We ran a small pilot effort here at Climate Reality during the legislative fight. At the same time we had 220 people focus on passing the climate legislation, we also had a small team of about 10 people working on a pilot project called 'Repower at Home'. This group consisted of a bunch of 20-somethings; several of whom were incredibly gifted computer/social media/internet type people, who'd cut their teeth on 'Obama 08' or computer science at school. And they built a social online process where they essentially made doing energy efficiency at home cool.

They turned it into a game, a competition, and a collaborative community of people who would take efforts to learn about the savings of energy efficiency; apply those savings in their own homes and their own lives and then share that with their neighbours, their friends and their social networks. Over the six months to nine months they were able to experiment with this process, they brought about a bunch of changes and increases in energy efficiency in several counties in the state of Maryland, where they were focused.

It was a trial, it was a pilot, there were many mistakes; but it's that sort of energy that will ultimately produce the solutions we need. They weren't waiting for government action. They acknowledged they would benefit from government action if there were a price on carbon or some sort of limit on carbon that had the market signals there. But even without the market signals, they were using social media, gaming, technology, a desire for community to try and bring about the change. It was a totally 'outside the box' thing, it was just fabulous to see. I think there are many, many efforts around the country now and I think we're just starting to hear about them and one of them's just going to pop.

JW: **Who knows what's going to come out of India or China or...?**

KC: Yes and I'm speaking to the country I know, which is America. I just know the same energy and experimentation is going on in your country of Australia and the large developing economies of China, India, Brazil, Argentina; there's good stuff going on.

JW: **Do you have direct connections with developing countries with India and China and...?**

KC: The other half of this organisation...what used to be called the Climate Project and is now called the Climate Leader's Program. It's 3500 people who have been trained by Al Gore himself to give his slideshow and we're

adapting that model to call it 'winning the conversation going forward'. To answer your question, of those 3500 trained presenters, approximately half – 1500-1700 - are not in the US and are in other parts of the world; China, Indonesia, Australia, Europe.

We have partnerships with many different hosting organisations. In Australia, it's the Australian Conservation Foundation which hosts the Climate Project in Australia. It's the Good Planet Foundation in Europe. It's the David Suzuki Foundation in Canada. We work with different groups, we partner with them; we try and share best practices.

JW: Can I ask you to put on your most optimistic hat?

KC: Which is hard; I'm Irish Catholic, we don't do optimism!

JW: Well let's give it a go anyway. Imagine it's 2030 - about 20 years from now. Imagine we're sitting here and we're living in the world where the transition to a decarbonised economy, an economy where preventing runaway climate change is well and truly on track. This is really happening. Looking back from 2030, how did we get there? Tell me the story of how we got to where we needed to be.

KC: I think how we get there is a collection of individual acts of leadership by leaders; existing leaders and leaders who emerged to seize the moment. Who just said 'no we cannot let our climate be so fundamentally changed. We cannot grow our average temperature by 6 to 8 degrees centigrade by the end of the century. We can't afford what that's going to do; so we are going to solve this together'. It will be individual acts of leadership and it will be business leaders leading their companies into different directions, including supporting laws, calling for change.

It'll be consumers demanding new products, it'll be companies providing new products, it'll be media; it'll just be a movement. It'll be people from all walks of life having demonstrated true leadership, taking on the status quo, taking on a sense of negativism and 'it's too late-ness' that we've talked about and of saying 'no we can't let this happen and we'll work together'. I think we've had moments like that in the world and I think we'll have it again.

I don't think we've had a moment like this facing the world before, where we know there's a looming crisis that impacts us all. As that awareness grows over the next five or 10 years, I'm convinced there will be a burst of leadership, spontaneous leadership from around the globe, around the sectors, who are just saying 'no we have to do something'. It won't be coordinated, it won't be led, it won't be controlled, it will just happen and it will happen if all of us in the next five years - get the word out.

JW: A lot of people talk about tipping points and that there might be particular weather driven or other sorts of tipping points, but this isn't proposing an argument of waiting for tipping points, it's an argument that there's a whole series of tasks to be done now...

KC: It's doing everything we can to accelerate getting to that tipping point through education, through community building, through awareness. Sadly that's the optimistic half; now let me give you the Irish pessimist half.

I'm afraid there will probably be some more crises that will impact more people that will bring home the reality of climate change in some very sad and devastating ways and that will probably also help catalyse the system.

If you look at the history of environmental legislation of the United States; it's often in response to a crisis. I hope we avoid that because this crisis is a big one; but I think there will probably be early impacts that will help catalyse the system too. But I'm also convinced that we have the ability to educate ourselves and see this one coming.

JW: I'd be interested in your own reflections of all of the many things, the many choices, that you could make personally over the next few years. Where have you decided to put your energy; your personal energy and why?

KC: For me the journey has been one of 30-plus years of working in Washington DC. I love government, and the political process. It's sloppy, it's messy, but it's the best one we've got. Democracy is where the best ideas compete and you have fair fights and unfair fights; but it's how we make decisions. I even love Congress, and the way it works or not. For the longest time I felt we were solving a 'problem'.

My first job out of college was being the lowest paid political appointee at the Department of Energy under President Jimmy Carter during which we experienced the first energy shock; the Middle East, Iran, the gasoline lines here. I've worked on energy policy on and off since then. For me the journey is 'this is not a problem to solve, this is a movement to build', that talks about the future of the planet. I sound evangelical, maybe even a little wacky; but I think it's the awareness that that's the scale of what we're talking about. It's, for me, been a transition point in the past year and I see it happening with many of my colleagues.

I think it's that sort of passion and appreciation of the scale of the problem and the scale of the solution required on the public will, political education scale that energises me and that I think is what's needed. It's different. It's not just a long pass. It's a different way of producing energy.

JW: My last question is an 'elevator pitch' question. If you had a minute, or time to say two or three sentences to the most senior decision makers in this country and globally what would you want to say to them about what needs to be done and why, in relation to the climate crisis?

KC: I would tell them to speak the truth. Speak the truth about the severity of the climate crisis; speak the truth about the need to build political will and public education. Speak the truth about the fact that it's solvable, once we get the political will and truly lead on this issue; not see it as a political problem, but to just truly see it as a massive problem and a massive opportunity. Again, to speak truth to the American people; speak truth to their staff and commit to solving it. That's what I would say.

JW: Thank you