

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

Bill McKibben & Akaya Windwood: Boomers, Big Banks & Solving the Climate Crisis

LAURA FLANDERS- Anyone out there of a certain age who has ever thought to themselves, maybe it's time for my generation to step aside. After all, just look at the mess we've made. If today's guests ever had that thought, they quite quickly shut it down. Instead of stepping away, they have stepped up to tackle some of the most intractable troubles of our time and recommitted themselves to activism, even maybe to getting arrested. Though they have both been organizers for years. Akaya Windwood is the former head of the Rockwood Leadership Institute and the author of a just released book, "Leading with Joy: Practices for Uncertain Times." Bill McKibben is a longtime environmental activist, founder of 350.org. His latest book is, "The Flag, the Cross and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at his Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened." Together, last year they launched a new group, Third Act, what is Third Act about? Well kind of getting old, taking responsibility and throwing the full weight of the boomers generation at big, bad dirty banks. For starters Akaya Windwood is lead advisor at Third Act. Bill McKibben is founder. Thank you both for joining us and we are super excited to have you.

AKAYA WINDWOOD & BILL M KIBBEN - Very good with you, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS- Akaya starting with you, not everyone may be familiar with Rockwood. So how would you describe yourself? If you like, maybe you could describe your first and second acts a little for our audience.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- My first act back when I was in my teen and twenties, this was back in the seventies. This was when a lot was going on. The women's movement was going on, the farm workers movement was happening. American Indian movement was going on. The gay lesbian movement was had just begun. The first pride parades were going on, Earth Day, the time of huge possibility and that's when I'd come of age So my first acts were formed in that amazing caldron of possibility and this was pre Reagan, pre AIDS. And so we were experimenting in all kinds of ways and it really framed kind of how I thought about the rest, how I've lived the rest of my life, which is from a place of so many things are possible. We can come together, we can do amazing things. And despite the common story, there's always been an underground deep, wonderful movement of movements.

LAURA FLANDERS- And what about you, Bill? Thanks Akaya. Your book kind of describes you coming up as a fairly proud little New Englander boy.

BILL MCKIBBEN- I guess that's right. What Akaya says is so acute. We were around to bear witness to and to participate in a little, this period of epic social and cultural transformation. And if you have any idea how epic it was or any doubt, just look at what the Supreme Court did. Everything they did was taking aim at stuff that happened in that 7, 8, 10 year period. The Voting

Rights Act of '65, the Clean Air Act of '71, the Gun Control Act of 1968, Roe v. Wade, 1973. Look with noble exceptions like Akaya, I think it's fair to say that these generations may have spent more of their second act on consumerism than on citizenship. But that water's under the bridge now. We emerge into this third act with lots of resources, lots of skills, some time and in many cases with kids, grandkids, nieces, nephews, people who make this abstract concept of legacy, very, very concrete.

LAURA FLANDERS- Not to mention wag their fingers at you and me and us on occasion. So talk about third act. I mean, what brought the two of you together? Was it Vermont? What was it and what is the kind of overarching mission of it? Bill, let's start with you.

BILL MCKIBBEN- Well the mission is to take people of our age, over the age of 60 and get them engaged in action around progressive change. Now the prevailing wisdom has been that people become more conservative as they age. And so really no one's tried to do this sort of systematically since Maggie Kuhn and the Gray Panthers back in the 1970s, really. But we don't think that that's true. And we think that the response over the last six months to this idea, as it's gotten out there, has proven that there are a lot of people in this generation at least who have that kind of historical DNA that will let them go to work.

LAURA FLANDERS- You are also dedicated to young women's leadership and focusing on young people. How did Bill persuade you or how did you leap to the conviction that it's the boomers up that we need to talk about.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- If we're gonna transform and that's what we're about. It can't be located in any one where, any one group of people or any one generation, right? One of the gifts of the last 40 years is that independent social movements began to come together as this is a movement of movements and that you can't think about racial justice if you're not thinking about gender and economics and all the things that are interconnected always have been. I don't think we've thought about it in that way.

LAURA FLANDERS- The Supreme Court certainly have, as Bill just pointed out, I mean Bill coming to you, there is the other side of this too. We may have been realizing that all things are interconnected and we are just specs on the universal dot of time. But our generation, those of us over 60, I turned 60 this year, the end of last year, are also responsible for more damage than any other generation that has ever lived, at least according to you.

BILL MCKIBBEN- No question. We've had tremendous leverage, 'cause there've been a lot of us and we've burned through a lot of the planet's resources. First of all, many congratulations on reaching that age. It's real...

LAURA FLANDERS- I did it just to join you, Bill, honestly,

BILL MCKIBBEN- It's a real milestone and a good one. Second thing, to what Akaya said, that's absolutely right. Look, I've done most of my organizing over my life with younger people

and because that's who's been leading the climate movement, lock, stock and barrel from the kids that I founded 350.org with, to the Sunrise movement to Greta Thunberg and all the Greta Thunbergs scattered around the planet. I just started getting nervous that people were, I kept hearing people say, well, it's up to the next generation to solve these problems. That's A, ignoble and B, impractical for all their earnestness, idealism, intelligence, accomplishment, energy, they lack the structural power by themselves to make the changes that we need. So that's why it's so much fun when it comes together. Just to give you an example, we've been doing this work around banks and the fossil fuel industry. And so we, I was at a protest not long ago. We helped organize outside Chase Bank, biggest funder of the fossil fuel industry on planet earth. And so there were a ton of high school kids there. High school kids are a little sprayer. They were at the front of the march. Behind them, there's this cloud of people our age marching under a banner that says "Fossils Against Fossil Fuels". That's the spirit in which we need to work. And let me tell you, young people correctly have been calling out older people, some of that, 'OK Boomer' stuff is real and understandable, but there is a palpable relief too among younger people when they find older people willing to stand up behind them and get this work done. They don't like being abandoned on their own to solve the world's problems. They understand that it's gonna take people working together.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- You know, I'm not as hard on we old folks as Bill tends to be.

LAURA FLANDERS- Maybe you've hung out with better ones.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- Well, maybe I have, maybe I have because I'm so aware of how many folks have stayed in the work all their lives. I've been talking with a number of young folks over the years and 'cause I thought, well, it's time for us to step back, right? It's time for the people over 60 to step aside, create space for the new leadership to come forward. And they're actually saying, no, that's actually not what we want you to do. We don't want you to step aside or step back. What we want you to do is step beside us. So rethinking our role is gonna be really important in the next several years. And one of the things I'm really thinking about is how do we be good elders? Very few of us have role models that say, this is how one becomes a good elder. Because I mean, there are some cultures that still have that, but the dominant culture does not. So we're gonna have to rethink or actually create new ways for elders to develop ourselves. And we need to do that in a cross generational context.

LAURA FLANDERS- Well, just to stick with this for a second, and I can hear the heavens have broken over your head, Bill. The question of what to do is front and center in this moment where everything seems so urgent and you wrote about the Supreme Court decision on the EPA in the New Yorker Magazine saying that frankly we are not gonna get the change we need through government necessarily right now and that Wall Street may be the key. How so?

BILL MCKIBBEN- Well look, in a rational world, governments would long since have been at work at solving the greatest crisis that we face. But as you know, our political system is gamed by vested interests and quite effectively, so lacking the kind of most straightforward direct route to doing things, we find other places to try and apply pressure. Wall Street actually is an

interesting one because it remains globally powerful, even in a way that Washington isn't quite anymore. And when it acts, it acts quickly, which is something that our political systems do not do. If tomorrow we were able to persuade Chase Bank that it should stop lending to the fossil fuel industry for its expansion, for instance, that would be reflected on every stock market on planet earth within 20 minutes. Everybody would know about it and it would be affecting decisions and making changes right there, which is kind of the speed at which we need to go. Now, I'll back up and say it's not acceptable that our political system is as chaotic and dysfunctional as it is. And one of the other things that we're working hard on at Third Act is trying to make democracy work, standing up to the voter's suppression. This is a big fall. We're taking on the banks and we're also trying to make sure that the midterms are not a disaster. These are important battles on many fronts.

LAURA FLANDERS- You cite the 'Powell Memo' written by Lewis Powell, who was put on the court in the seventies, eighties, laying out his vision. That is just now what, 40, 50 years later coming to pass.

BILL MCKIBBEN- This goes directly back to what Akaya was talking about at the beginning. This is in exactly this same period of time. 1971, the people, 1970 people turned out by the millions in the first Earth Day and within a year, because the government then sort of worked, we passed the Clean Air Act. Well, Lewis Powell and the rest of big business didn't like the Clean Air Act and didn't like regulation. And so they set out to make sure that nothing like this ever happened again. And they built the think tanks and the institutions and they patiently, figured out how to pack the courts and on and on and on. And 50 years on, they get to where we are. Now, here's the thing to realize, and this really is important. They've won that structural battle in a sense for the moment, but they haven't won the battle of opinion. These Supreme Court opinions where each one of them, not just anti majoritarian, but I mean, we're not talking like 52/48 unpopular, we're talking like 70/30 unpopular. People want the women's right to choose. People want to be able to control guns in our society, people are freaked out about climate change and want the government doing something about it. So there is a powerful opportunity here for organizers to snatch victory from the jaws of that 50 year big money effort if we can figure out how to make those majorities count. And a big part of that is getting older people engaged in that, because we constitute such a large part of those majorities. There are 70 million people over the age of 60. You're part of a big club now, Laura, and you know, it's bigger than the population of France. And if we can shift even a little bit older people's sense of what they should be doing, how they should be thinking about the world, what our possibilities are, we can make a big dent in in that fight. We can really back up young people effectively.

LAURA FLANDERS- In your book Akaya, "Leading with Joy," you write about being at a meeting of financial leaders and activists focusing on a new economic model. One of the topics close to our hearts. And you realize that the words 'white male supremacy', 'patriarchy', keep coming up in everybody's mouth. And you say, I was stunned. I realize that this thing, this end of patriarchy and white supremacy is no longer a pipe dream. I remember talking about it as a young woman and it's here.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, it's in our common vernacular. I mean, Laura, I'm six years older than you are and welcome to the club. But let's think back, back in, when we were young, the people who were whispering things like patriarchy or supremacy, we weren't even, we weren't using language like white supremacy. We talked about racism or whatever, right? Now this is, people go, yeah, okay, so tell me something new, right?

LAURA FLANDERS- Sort of like capitalism, Bill. When I was coming up, we weren't allowed to say that either.

BILL MCKIBBEN- That's right.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- Exactly right. And now it's every day and everybody's going that I know. How are we gonna, how do we dismantle well, such it's sufficient that these children who are coming in now can thrive.

LAURA FLANDERS- Well, so that goes back to what Third Act is doing. Not that it's the only thing that either one of you is doing, but you do have some specific actions planned and they have to do with banks. And you said an amazing thing to me when I heard you speak, Bill, about the damage passive money does, it seems to be passive to us, but it's not really.

BILL MCKIBBEN- Turns out that the money that sits in the American banking system produces more carbon than pretty much anything else. Companies that have a big cash on hand, like say this report said that Google's carbon emissions went up 111% once you started figuring out how the money that they had sitting in the bank being loaned out to build pipelines and things was creating climate change. Netflix, there's more carbon that comes from their cash on hand than from everybody on the planet sitting on the sofa every night streaming bad movies. Amazon produces more carbon from its cash than it does from all its delivery vans and warehouses that it owns. And you and I, if we have 125 grand in the bank and it's in the sort of mainstream banks, it's producing more carbon than all the driving, flying, heating, cooking, cooling that we do in the course of a year.

LAURA FLANDERS- And where should our money go then?

BILL MCKIBBEN-- We have lots of answers at Thirdact.org about where to go. But the real point is we need to shift the policies of these big guys. We need to make them, we need to make them embarrassed enough that they actually stop doing what they're doing. That's where the real leverage is gonna lie.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- We're busy helping, putting some things together so that folks can have some alternatives and go. There's an emergent black bank movement. There's all kinds of things that are out there that people just don't know because it's under the radar. So part of our work then will be to illuminate some of these new ways of thinking about money and what we can do about it. I'm also aware that the philanthropic sector and you know, God loves them. In order to become a foundation you only have to give away 5% of your corpus. So there's 95% of

all of the money in philanthropy is sitting doing the kinds of things that Bill was just talking about, right? So it's not just corporate global corporations, it's also the structures that support this, that are dear to money of our hearts, right? It's a whole system and we need to think about it that way.

LAURA FLANDERS- I can't end without asking both of you really about, about joy and heartbreak. Akaya maybe start with you.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- And I wrote this "Leading with Joy" because we saw the consequences of leadership that was...people were angry and despairing and for good reason. Please don't mishear me. But the consequences of leading from anger and despair and outrage means that we take that kind of energy out on each other and we were looking at seeing so much burnout and young people saying, I don't wanna, I don't wanna take up leadership if that's what that looks like. And so we looked at the canon of leadership books. We didn't see anything about joy and realized that even as women of color who, ostensibly have been more harmed by systems of racism and sexism and all things than others, but it is the joy that allows us to get up and continue to do the work, right? Which is not to discount the outrage. There's a lot of outrageous things out there, but it can't be our only fuel. The places where my heart breaks is also breaks open. And that opening allows for new things like joy to come through. So it's a piece, it's a whole piece. It's not either heartbreak or joy. It's and/or. I'll hand it to you, Bill here. what do you think about that?

BILL MCKIBBEN- What happened in our lifetimes that's been most tragic was the elevation of the idea of each of us as individuals. That's what the "Reagan Revolution" was about. Ending the project of trying to build a good society as LBJ put it, or a beloved community as Dr. King put it, and replaced it with the project as of just getting us each rich as individuals. So one of the things that we're trying hard to do at Third Act and Akaya is especially good at this, much better than me, is really helping people figure out how to kind of build that culture of caring in a way that lets us connect in powerful, beautiful ways again. And the hunger for that is so deep, so deep. We're socially evolved primates and 40 years of Reaganism is not enough to ring that out of our DNA.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- We need to learn to be better neighbors. And I know, I live here in Oakland and my neighborhood is filled with people who agree with me and probably many who don't. At the same time, I'm not gonna let my political differences with my neighbors determine whether or not I'll share my squash and my garden. That won't be a determining factor, right? So if we can remember who we've been, right? This is not to go back to the old bye and bye, it really is to say we are inherently interrelated and that's just the nature of being human. We're herd animals basically. And so it's a toxic mistake that we see ourselves as independent. That's one of the things I think we need to, if we could put together a new constitution, it would not be about independence, it would be about interdependence. And I know that's an overused word, but we do depend on each other. There's no way I could live for a day without the rest of my family. And to be able to expand the notion of who my people are. That's what we're about at Third Act. That our people are people we don't know yet, but will.

BILL MCKIBBEN- Beautiful.

LAURA FLANDERS- Thank you. We ask our guests what they think the story will be that the future tells of this moment. And I wondered if you wanted to answer that Bill.

BILL MCKIBBEN- What this moment could be about is sort of decade of extraordinary transition. I wrote earlier this year that the fact that renewable clean energy has gotten so cheap means that we might be at the moment when humans could end their 200,000 year career of setting stuff on fire and just rely on the fact that the good Lord put a big ball of burning gas 93 million miles away and we know how to make use of it. That's a beautiful story that we could be telling.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- I think they'll look back and go, this was when it turned, when we decided that our collective wellbeing was more important than somebody's bank account. And people gathered together and put their brains together and put their gen, the generations came together and told a different story and in telling a different story, it became true. So that's how we got to here 300 years in the future because of that moment where we've made a different choice.

LAURA FLANDERS- Beautiful. Akaya Windwood is the author of the just released "Leading with Joy: Practices for Uncertain Times" out now from Berrett-Koehler and Bill McKibben is the author of "The Flag the Cross and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at his Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened." Thank you both so much for this gorgeous conversation.

AKAYA WINDWOOD- Thank you so much.

BILL MCKIBBEN- Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS- Can people come together? Absolutely. Environmentalists from across the spectrum of the movement came together in Washington this fall and scored something of a victory, when senators approved a stop gap spending bill without West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin's provision that would've fast tracked federal approval of gas pipeline projects, including one in which he is personally involved. Is Manchin's deal with energy dead? No. And there is much more to be done. Bill McKibben will be coming to the Catskill region of New York to tell us more at a live taping of this show that's taking place in Callicoon. You can get information about how to join us in person or check out the live stream at our website. And don't forget, subscribers to our free podcast receive the full unedited version of each week's conversation. And this week's with Akaya Windwood and Bill McKibben was particularly full of content that we couldn't fit into the show. So get the information on our event and our podcast at our website and don't forget to stay kind and stay curious. 'Til the next time, I'm Laura. And if you are part of the Third Act generation, welcome to what I'm counting on being the best part of our lives. Thanks for joining me. For more on this episode and other forward thinking content,

subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations.
We also have a podcast, it's all at lauraflanders.org.