

The Green New Deal and the Sunrise Movement: A MAHB Dialogue with Sunrise Activist Leader, Marcela Mulholland

Geoffrey Holland



Sharing our World | Photo courtesy of the author

Marcela Mulholland talks about the grassroots efforts behind the Green New Deal and how policy can impact systems transformation.

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GH – The Sunrise Movement is young people actively engaged in encouraging a Green New Deal for planet Earth. What is the Green New Deal?

MM – So, the Green New Deal is a massive social, political and economic mobilization to stop climate change. The Green New Deal includes three central tenets. First, it would get us to 100% clean energy by 2030. Secondly, the Green New Deal would create millions of jobs across the country ensuring that anyone who wants to work on helping to address the climate crisis is guaranteed a good job with a livable wage. Thirdly it calls for a just transition, which would ensure that communities on the front lines of poverty and pollution are supported through the transition to a green economy. What makes the Green New Deal different? Why am I excited by it? It's the only proposal on the table that actually meets the scale of the climate crisis and the urgent timeframe set by the United Nations' latest IPCC report.

**GH - Why is it so important to be assertive in our actions to moderate greenhouse gases?
How can we motivate our government be assertive in its climate policy?**

MM- We have an emergency. The world's leading climate scientists have told us, through the United Nations' recent IPCC report, that we really have just twelve years to avoid the worst kind of climate catastrophes. We are spiraling towards a very scary world with mass climate driven migrations; extreme weather events, such as drought, floods and wildfires. There are also grave economic implications. The federal government recently published the Fourth National Climate Assessment. It claimed that, at worst, global warming will cost a total of 10% of US GDP by the end of the century. So, not only does climate change threaten people's lives, and our environment, but it also it could drastically harm the economy. On a more personal note, I was born and raised in South Florida. For coastal communities like mine, addressing climate change really is a matter of life or death. Scientists predict that by the end of the century the place where I grew up could be under seven feet of water, if we don't do something to stop the rising seas. That's why it's important for us to be aggressively cutting our greenhouse gas emissions now.

GH - Is turning back climate change enough? Should we also be focused on moderating our exploitation of our Earth's limited resources and other long term strategies?

MM - We definitely should be focused on addressing the wide array of environmental issues we face. For me, the Green New Deal marks a much-needed transformation in our understanding of humanity's relationship to nature. The values shaping a policy like the Green New Deal exemplify an understanding that we cannot indefinitely exploit and extract from the natural systems that support life on earth. All of life is connected. We must take care of the biosphere that we all rely on for our well-being. Hopefully the Green New Deal will just be the starting point for a more healthy, ethical relationship with our environment moving forward.

GH - Is rethinking how our market driven economy is designed an important part of building a sustainable future that puts people and planets first?

MM - Yeah, definitely; the Green New really does put people and planet first. We live in a moment of intersecting crises, where we have unprecedented economic inequality in the United States, and we also are dealing with climate change, the greatest existential threat humanity has ever faced. A Green New Deal promises to address both of those issues. Over the past few decades, Republicans and centrist Democrats have, at best, offered market-based climate solutions. We know that hasn't worked at all. What we need is assertive policy like the

Green New Deal, which would create unprecedented, sweeping policy change to stop human caused climate pollution, and would also create millions of good jobs for working class Americans.

GH - Do you think it's possible to redesign society to be more sustainable when public policy is shaped by politicians, whose primary allegiance is to bankers, billionaires and corporate elites?

MM - No, I do not think it's possible to get the political change that we need with political leaders, who are owned by billionaires from Wall Street, from the fossil fuel industry, and from Big Pharma. An essential part of the Sunrise Movement strategy has been to encourage something we call the No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge. This is a pledge that people who are running for elected office, or who are already in office, can sign. Taking the pledge means a candidate or official is committing to not refusing campaign contributions from fossil fuel CEOs and billionaires. Instead, they agree to prioritize the health of people and planet. An essential part of our political strategy is getting rid of the corrosive impact fossil fuel money has had on our politics.

GH - Many people believe that treating corporations as persons and money as speech are a big part of dysfunction in governance. Do you agree? If so, what can be done about it?

MM – I totally agree that treating corporations as people and having them use their money to influence our political system has been really bad for public policy and democracy in general. You see it with the fossil fuel industry, which uses political contributions to get the energy policy they want. If we're waiting for 'Citizens United' to be reversed, we might be waiting a long time. For now, we're pushing elected leaders to pledge not to be corrupted by accepting money from big donors, who want political favors in return.

GH - Why does the Green New Deal have so much promise as a jobs creator and a stimulant to our economy?

MM –It is going to take a lot of work to transform our economy and society at the scale that science demands. That's why, when I hear politicians argue that environmental policies are bad for the economy, or bad for workers and job creation, it makes no sense. If we actually addressed climate change assertively, as we should, it would literally create millions of jobs across this country. We're talking about transforming the transportation sector, agricultural sector, manufacturing, and energy sectors. Doing so will necessarily create plenty of work for people across the country. People are ready to get to work for livable wages under programs

that will emerge from the Green New Deal. That's something I'm really excited about, because for so long, we've been sold the false choice of having to choose either the economy, or the environment. We are here to say that we have a right to good jobs and a livable planet.

GH - Do you think it's important to have a media that is unbiased and trustworthy? How can this be accomplished, when the media to a large degree has been taken over by corporate interests, which shape the news they report to serve their own agenda?

MM - Yeah, it's extremely important to have a media that is unbiased and trustworthy. A free and unbiased media is one of the most important factors that allows our democracy to function. Unfortunately, the media has been unduly influenced by corporate interests. They don't always report truthfully about environmental issues. We know that corporate and fossil fuel money have co-opted our media, just like they have corrupted our politics. At Sunrise, we're focused on getting fossil fuel money out of politics, and we recognize that fossil fuel money has corrupted more spheres than just the electoral politics arena.

GH - What are the strategies being used by the sunrise movement to spread its Green New Deal message at the grassroots?

MM - We know that if the Green New Deal is going to succeed, it can't just be something that policy wonks in Washington talk about. That's why we're spending much of the first half of 2019 taking the Green New Deal beyond the DC beltway to the American people, on what we're calling the Green New Deal Tour of fifteen cities across America. It's going to feature some big names from the Democratic Party, as well as movement leaders. We want to talk to everyday Americans about how the Green New Deal could improve their lives.

GH - What can individual citizens do to support the Sunrise Movement's Green New Deal agenda?

MM - Right now, the main thing we're focusing on is what we're calling the Senate Sprint, because Mitch McConnell said he would put the Green New Deal up for a vote sometime within the next few weeks. So, we are really focused on getting senators to go on the record in support of a Green New Deal. We want to encourage our supporters to call or write to their senators, asking them to pledge support for the Green New Deal proposal. People can also go to our [website](#) to stay up to date with our work and follow our social media. This is a grassroots effort. To win this fight, we need lots of citizens to get involved.

Marcela is a committed advocate for criminal justice reform and climate action from the Ft. Lauderdale area in South Florida. In addition to her civic engagement, she studies Political Science and Sustainability Studied at the University of Florida. She will also be interning for the NAACP's Environmental & Climate Justice Program.

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