



Harvard, act on climate change

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By Carol Costello

It's all about money.

That great big money pit where hypocrisy lives and science goes to die.

Take climate change. Yeah, I hear some of you. You don't "believe in it," as though global warming is some kind of religion. Well, it sort of is. But it has little to do with God and everything to do with the color green.

I discovered just how cynical I am about that "money pit" when I sat down recently with Chloe Maxmin, a 22-year-old climate activist and junior at Harvard University whose idealism shines as bright as the North Star.

I asked her why the issue is so important.

"Climate change is affecting everything I love and everything I care about," Maxmin told me. "My values at the moment lie around mitigating climate change and doing something about this impending crisis that is going to affect my generation and billions of people around the world."

That's quite a challenge, I said to her. Let's face it, there are powerful people out there who think scientists are elitist, politicized job killers.

"If we come at this from a place of love," Maxmin responded, "this infinite wellspring of energy that we can draw on, then it's hard to believe that we can't achieve a better world."

But I just don't see a genuine love for the planet these days. Money and politics are powerful motivators. It's why some really smart people discount the fact there is a 97% consensus among scientific experts that the Earth is getting warmer and human beings are in part to blame.

The incoming Senate majority leader, Kentucky Republican Mitch McConnell, told the Cincinnati Enquirer's editorial board that he doesn't know if climate change is a real problem because he's "not a scientist." McConnell added, "I am interested in protecting Kentucky's economy, I'm interested in having low-cost electricity." Then, he asserted that, "...in the 1970s, people feared an Ice Age was imminent."

Actually, only a handful of scientists feared another Ice Age. The Christian Science Monitor points to MIT's climatologist Richard Lindzen, a climate-change skeptic, to prove the point. Lindzen wrote this for the (conservative) Cato Institute in 1992:

"Indeed, the global cooling trend of the 1950s and 1960s led to a minor global cooling hysteria in the 1970s. ... But the scientific community never took the issue to heart, governments ignored it, and with rising global temperatures in the late 1970s the issue more or less died."

Let's return to 2014. A discounted Ice Age analogy comes in handy when, like McConnell, you come from a state that depends on fossil fuel for jobs, and you're lobbied relentlessly by an industry with money to burn.

According to OpenSecrets.org: "Companies with interests in oil and gas contributed more than \$70 million to federal candidates in the 2012 cycle, more than double the total contributed in 2010." It goes on to cite, "Political donations from the industry -- which includes gas producers and refiners, natural gas pipeline companies, gasoline stations, and fuel oil dealers -- have taken on an increasingly conservative tint over the past two decades. In the 2012 cycle, 90% of its contributions went to the GOP."

Mitch McConnell, by the way, received more than 1.2 million in campaign dollars from oil, coal and gas entities. Now, I can't know for sure whether McConnell's "disbelief" in climate change is swayed by that great big money pit because, let's face it, Kentucky depends on the coal industry for thousands of jobs and McConnell would not be in office if he didn't support the industry.

Maxmin recognizes that economic fact, but she's also absolutely sure "that a lot of climate denial comes from the fossil fuel industry buying off politicians, propagating climate denial."

So, how exactly would Maxmin's "infinite wellspring of energy" beat out \$70 million and save the planet? Her solution is to fight fire with fire.

Maxmin figured that if people like her can persuade Harvard to divest its \$36 billion endowment from fossil fuel companies, it would send a powerful message to not only the fossil fuel industry but also our politicians. She has co-founded Divest Harvard to do just that.

Stanford University has already decided it will no longer directly invest in coal mining companies because it has a responsibility to consider "corporate policies or practices (that) create substantial social injury."

Harvard is fighting climate change, too. The university has an enviably small carbon footprint and its scientists are among the most respected for their work in global warming. But so far, the university has refused to divest because its president, Drew Faust, says divestment is "likely to have a negligible financial impact on the affected companies." CNN reached out to Faust and received no response.

Just as McConnell's state depends on the coal industry for jobs, Harvard depends on the industry, too. Harvard has the world's largest university endowment with \$32.7 billion. As Faust points out, Harvard "counts on the fund to finance more than a third of its operating budget."

Maxmin is unmoved. "We think that Harvard is not a corporation and that profit shouldn't be our main motivator," she told me. "Our main motivator should be about the students. And how can we invest in fossil fuel companies that are threatening our futures? It's an immoral bet against my generation."

Keep in mind, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, made up of hundreds of scientists, determined climate change has already affected "agriculture, human health, ecosystems...(and) water supplies."

French President Francois Hollande said global warming could lead to war. Even the U.S. Defense Department says climate change poses an "immediate risk to national security."

And still, powerful politicians say, "I'm not a scientist." And Harvard still feels pulling its investments out of fossil fuels would "diminish the influence or voice we might have with this industry."

I understand where both sides are coming from, but it still bugs me. And it bugs Maxmin.

"When you're talking about climate activism, I agree that we are seen as radical, but the science is so straightforward. And what's radical is ignoring the science. What's radical is continuing to use fossil fuels. What's radical is a government that refuses to address climate change."

Need I say more?