

The Second Transition Podcast

Episode 2 - Private Sector

with Jamie Beck Alexander

<http://secondtransition.conservaionofchange.org>



This podcast and transcript is shared under an Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). For more information see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>

🕒 24:49

SPEAKERS

Philip Loring, Jamie Beck Alexander, Ben Franta

J Jamie Beck Alexander 00:02

The moment of drawdown is when levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, begin to peak and start to steadily decline. That's the moment of drawdown. In achieving drawdown in an actually meeting that moment of drawdown, it means that we're inherently building a new future. And we do that by implementing solutions that replace the stuff that is incompatible with that world.

P Philip Loring 00:41

How do we as individuals contribute to solving the world's biggest problems, when so much economic and political power is held in the private sector, consolidated among a handful of billionaires and a few dozen transnational corporations? Can large firms be agents of change, considering how implicated they are in the status quo? Are there solutions to be found in partnering with the private sector? Or to put these questions in other way? Is there a future for the private sector as we know it in a radically changed world? Welcome to the second transition Podcast. I'm Phil Loring. This podcast is about radical change. It's based on the simple premise that a radically changed future may be closer than we think. Today, we talk about the private sector, because it's impossible really to consider radical change without talking about the private sector. The world's many large firms from the Amazons and Tesla's and Patagonia's to the British Petroleum and DuPont, have as much power to catalyse as they have to mislead, take climate change. Private sector activities carried the bulk of responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions. Not surprisingly, large corporations, and even the very economic system upon which they are built, have become the villains in the messaging of many and environmental movement. To think this through I'm speaking today with Jamie Beck Alexander, the founding director of Drawdown Labs, drawdown Labs is a very exciting initiative of the larger Project Drawdown, an amazing organisation working on finding and implementing solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and they focus on existing solutions. I'll talk with Jamie about her work at drawdown labs, how we confront obfuscation and delay from the private sector, and instead harness their power to underwrite radical change.

P Philip Loring 02:39

Before we hear the interview, however, I want to take a minute to talk about confirmation bias. Confirmation bias essentially describes how humans are more likely to believe new ideas and messages

Confirmation bias essentially describes how humans are more likely to believe new ideas and messages that they encounter if they jive with what they've already learned and experienced. Likewise, confirmation bias leads us to distrust things that seem counterintuitive or contradictory to the things that we already know and believe. I bring this up because as a scientist, I work hard to actively challenge my own confirmation bias. It's easy to settle into camps when it comes to major environmental and social issues. But we can't just let these positions become a matter of faith. We need to challenge our assumptions over and over again. And that's part of what I was doing. When I invited Jamie to join me today, I'm a vocal critic of capitalism and a sceptic of private sector action. I challenged myself with this interview to be ready to hear a positive message from Jamie and her work at drawdown labs. And I was encouraged by what she had to share. So let's dig in.

P

Philip Loring 03:53

Jamie Beck Alexander is the founding director of Drawdown Labs. She is a solutions oriented corporate climate advocate who has worked with a variety of companies to set ambitious emission reductions targets and leverage their influence in support of strong climate and clean energy policies. Previously, Jaime served as a civil and foreign service officer for USAID and with the United Nations Office of the Secretary General. Jamie, thank you very much for joining me today.

J

Jamie Beck Alexander 04:23

Thanks for having me. It's great to be here.

P

Philip Loring 04:25

Perhaps we can start with you telling me a little bit about Project drawdown and then more specifically, the work of Drawdown Labs.

J

Jamie Beck Alexander 04:33

Sure. Well project drawdown started several years ago as an effort to to really collect all of you know humanity's wisdom around around climate change. So what are the practices and technologies that we already have in hand to address the climate crisis? Because up until then, there was not a huge focus on solutions. There was really a focus on the problem and how bad it was and, you know, pointing fingers, but there wasn't there wasn't a focus on solutions. So we underwent an extensive research project with researchers around the world to understand what solutions are out there that are already in hand today and scalable. And how much money do we need to invest in each of them? And what is the greenhouse gas production potential of each of them? And then really to look at, okay, with everything we have in hand, is that sufficient to address the crisis is that sufficient to keep warming within 1.5 degrees Celsius and two degrees Celsius, which is, as you know, sort of the, you know, the benchmark that that we're trying to hit as a as a as a globe and not go beyond? We found that yes, we do have a, we have the solutions in hand today that are sufficient, if scaled ambitiously enough to, to limit warming to where we need it to be. And so that was really the founding of the organisation, we published the book Drawdown in 2017. And then, you know, a few years went by, and we realised climate solutions are not scaling as quickly as they need to be. And so we found a drawdown labs to really be sort of the Innovation Hub and the part of Project drawdown where we sort of move beyond just being a research and communication organisation into actually convening big leverage points in the system. So corporations, investors, to elim,

more limited extent policymakers to really look at okay, what are those the biggest movers, the the biggest, like levers for change? And how can we kind of exploit their, their scale and influence to be able to scale climate solutions faster?

P

Philip Loring 06:52

You mentioned, solutions that are in hand and scalable. And I wonder if you can give an example of what something like that looks like for the private sector?

J

Jamie Beck Alexander 07:02

Yeah, well, I mean, you know, the private sector has tended to focus on a few solutions. You know, there's renewable energy, which, of course, is a big one. And like building efficiency are two of the big solutions that most companies tend to focus on, because that's where the majority of their emissions come from. But there are so many more solutions out there like food waste, food waste is the second biggest. So if you look at it from the emission side of things, like the sources of emissions, of course, the energy, you know, the electricity sector is the biggest emitting sector. But the food and agriculture sector is just about tied with electricity, which we always when we think of climate change, we think of fossil fuels. And like, yes, of course, they're the biggest and most problematic part of the problem. But food and food waste and land use and agriculture, farming, that's just about tied with with our energy system in terms of how big it contribute, how much it contributes to the problem. And that is a, that's a problem where there's a lot of exciting solutions out there. And we, you know, until we really brought that to the fore, we hadn't seen, you know, food waste, talked about as a climate solution. Or you know, about plant based diets being talked about as a climate solution or regenerative agriculture being talked about as a climate solution, then now, we're starting to see more and more focused on those areas, as their as there should be.

P

Philip Loring 08:38

So when you thought about taking this position as the inaugural director, what did you have in mind? Or what do you have in mind as as a radical or ambitious goal? You're looking forward?

J

Jamie Beck Alexander 08:49

I love this question. So I took this role. I guess, almost two years ago now. I had been working in the advocacy like nonprofit space not you know, there's these nonprofits that work with companies and have these coalition's of companies I kind of been working in this space for a little while. And I saw so much hypocrisy and so much just problematic, like unhealthy relationships between like the the companies that are paying dues to nonprofits and you know, and then looking for some back padding an amplification of their latest big report. And I felt like there wasn't a whole lot of like deep rigorous question challenging and an acknowledgement of the problem. And so, when this you know, when the when this opportunity arose, I I sort of felt like you know, Project Drawdown ha such a, I would almost say like a mystique or like a power to the brand and We do have a lot of, you know, CEOs who have the book drawdown on their desk. And so I, you know, I thought if there's a way that I can try to do this in a way that honours, the true urgency and magnitude and the you know, and the real like change the transformational change that needs to happen, and felt like this was the police to be able to do that. So my goal was really to try to sort of like blow up the whole idea of like, what corporate climate leadership has, has been about for the last decade, and really

try to challenge that. And, you know, and play a little bit of the inside outside strategy and like, try to do some public pushing, and some deep work with them. And like, really try to get this to a place that that feels like it has some integrity to the scope and scale of the problem.

P

Philip Loring 10:49

I really appreciate what you're saying there and the sort of the approach and philosophy that it seems like you have, because when I think about the issue of climate change, and other environmental challenges, and the way that that the private sector is generally portrayed in those is, you know, there's there's a lot of anti establishment or anti status quo energy that gets directed at the private sector, towards large corporations towards billionaires taking trips to space and so forth. Right. And my sense is that what you've just told me in the premise of Drawdown Labs is that, that the is that the future of the private sector is by no means this black and white good and evil thing. And, and, but at the same time, it's also rather clear what firms and actors are, are, are having that copy of drawdown on their on the desks of the CEOs and what and what firms and actors are kind of standing in the way. And a lot is being made right now, for example of the great work that's been done by Dr. Ben Franta at Stanford on the misinformation and predatory delay that's come out of the oil industry. Now, I want to diverge here for a moment to give you a little bit more information on what I mean by predatory delay. I actually asked Dr. Ben Franta, if I could use a clip from his recent interview with the climate pod where he talks about this.

B

Ben Franta 12:10

So the fossil fuel industry has been really effective at, you know, using scientists, as spokespeople, especially back in the 1990s. Using scientists to say Oh, climate change is climate science is uncertain. One of my recent papers is about economists, and how fossil fuel industry funded a relatively small group of economists to write study after study saying climate action is too expensive. And then that message would get broadcast to the public. Without mentioning that it had been funded by the industry or that these economists have worked for the industry for many years. You know, it's a pretty, it's a pretty simple strategy, if you think about it, you know, fun people who are going to come up with the answer that you you want, and then tell people that look, I'm not telling you, they're telling you. So you know, they've done that they tonnes of distraction techniques like blaming the consumer focusing on changing your lightbulbs, these things are fine. And I'm in a sort of micro sense. I mean, it's good to not be wasteful, of course, but it distracted from the fact that we had replaced, we still have to replace fossil fuels as rapidly as possible this structural issue. I'm promoting solutions like methane gas, natural gas, and things like hydrogen, which is mostly made out of methane gas, things like carbon capture, which the industry has considered carbon capture, even from the early 80s to deal with climate change, but the problem was is too expensive, too expensive compared to renewables, which are getting cheaper all the time. So there are all of these distraction techniques that that divert attention away from the what ultimately has to be done, which is replace fossil fuels.

P

Philip Loring 14:14

And people wonder why I am so sceptical of the private sector. But let's get back to the interview. So if there's a question here, Jamie it's it's how do we confront issues like obstruction and predatory delay in the private sector while still tapping into all the power that the private sector can leverage towards change?



... ..

J Jamie Beck Alexander 14:35

I mean, this question I read this and I was like, I feel so seen from this question. It is exactly the right question. It is exactly it gets at the heart of of this, you know of this problem like they are a huge part corporations are, you know, a huge part of the problem and make up the vast majority of the emissions in the world. And they have an incredible for better or worse, you know, influence over politics, financial capital, human capital, you know, influence over like, our economic model. And so it's this it is, you know, I think it almost requires an inside outside strategy like, we need to both be constantly pushing for a higher standard and more action and more accountability and like being totally okay with exploiting they're, quite frankly, like exploiting that that scale and influence and reach and capital, which I really have no problem with, like, I think, I think a lot of the, you know, I work deeply with, with, you know, sustainability officers and others inside companies and the I think they appreciate the the like public, kind of the public challenging, and the inside, you know, as we're working closely with them on a number of things, and I also try to hold their feet to the fire externally, whether they're like formal partner of ours or not.

P Philip Loring 16:19

So there's all this opportunity for change. But there's also all this opportunity for greenwashing. And, you know, many of us can't see under the hood of all of the machinations of the corporate world. And so I wonder, Jamie, as someone who has something of an inside track on this, if, you know, if a presence of tipping points is that you can't see them until you've reached them? how close or how far away? Do you think we are from seeing in the private sector, not just platitudes, but real change? real transformative change? You know, everywhere we look, private firms are on board and doing the right thing for climate for example. What do you think?

J Jamie Beck Alexander 16:58

Oh, another great question. I I guess if I'm honest, I mean, I do think you know, I think the youth the youth movements of the last few years, the Friday's for future and sunrise movement, I do think that they have vastly accelerated our, you know, our arrival at that tipping point. In the private sector, I mean, you're we're having this conversation at a particular moment, when, you know, in the United States, we have our, you know, the the Biden administration's build back better act. I've been working very closely with companies to try to get them to support the build back better act and the climate provisions in that act. And, quite frankly, I've been really disappointed at the level of like courage that companies have had in stepping out of their lane and kind of saying, No, we need this, we actually, in order to achieve our climate targets, we need the climate investments that are part of this bill, and we need Congress to act quickly on them and pass the full package. And that honestly makes me question the authenticity of those commitments, that they're making all of those platitudes. Because if they're not wanting this huge, massive bill and investment in climate solutions, then they're not going to be able to achieve those targets.

P Philip Loring 18:27

It's a it's a really great answer. And I I understand the hedging, we there are mornings that I wake up and I'm full of fuel on fire and have a feeling that it's it's right around the corner, we just need to be pushed, keep pushing. And then there's other times when I I wonder, but being optimistic let's let's lead in the direction of optimism right now. It part of the premise of this show is that there's not just one major two major transitions ahead of us. And the first is about course, correction. I think the first is very much to some extent about drawdown and like a really, really transformational milepost, but a goal along the way,

to making all aspects of our society or food or businesses, more sustainable, more climate friendly, more socially, just so if if drawdown if we're optimistic and say, we are on our way we can we are going to do this. What comes after drawdown, do you think?

J Jamie Beck Alexander 19:20

Yeah, yeah, I mean, so drawdown, as you said, it's a moment in time, the moment of drawdown is when levels of you know, of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, begin to peak and start to steadily decline? That's the moment of drawdown, that's when we start to draw down the amount of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. That is a and we do that by implementing solutions that replace the stuff that is incompatible with that world. So it's both drawdown represents both something that we're moving away from which is greenhouse gases. That's what drawdown connotes like we're trying to draw down, we're trying to go away from greenhouse gases. But we're doing it by implementing this suite of solutions that to me when I look at our solutions right now, our 80 solutions that our team has assessed in our most recent update last year, and they include everything from, you know, walkable cities, to green roofs, to, you know, solar cookstoves to equitable health care and access to education for women and girls in developing countries. When I look at those solutions, I do see that as of as the future that we're moving toward. So I think in in achieving drawdown in actually meeting that moment of drawdown, it means that we're inherently building a new future.

P Philip Loring 20:56

I really like that idea. And I like the the idea of it being something that we move towards and achieve as opposed to, you know, for better or worse, one of the things that often motivates change is crisis. And I feel a lot of optimism around projects like drawdown that we can achieve radical changes without having to wait for a crisis to come and shake everything up. I have one other question for you. And, and it's something that I'm going to be asking of everybody who joins the show, and that is what is the most radical change that you are hopeful to see in your lifetime?

J Jamie Beck Alexander 21:40

Such a good question again. You know, I guess there's two answers. So on the private, you know, in the private sector front, I could give one answer, which is essentially that there would be like a world war two style mobilisation of every company, and every part of the workforce saying, okay, my business model is no longer compatible with this world that we need to build. And so I'm going to stop producing that crap that I've been producing. And I'm going to put my workforce to work on, you know, building solar panels or building you know, heat pumps, or turn these farmers into, like, educate them to be regenerative agriculture, farmers, or, I would love to see a wholesale, like, we can't do this anymore. And when there's a whole lot of other things we need to be doing. So let's just acknowledge that some sectors are just incompatible full stop with the future, we need that kind of change, I would love to see the you know, shortly not not in decades, but sooner than that. And then yeah, and then I guess, on the global, the global community friend just more, more dreaming together about, you know, about like, the kind of world like I want for my foreign six year old and really thinking about the community aspect and the what we want, yeah, what we want to build together and to really do that intentionally. I think that would just be a wonderful, a wonderful life giving part of all of this, we could actually come out of this with a, you know, with, with, with a world that we all want to live in together. That's a change that I would very much love to see.

P

Philip Loring 23:25

And I am right there with you in that. Jamie, this has really been a lovely conversation. I really appreciate it and I appreciate your time and that you took the time to have it with me. Thank you very much.

J

Jamie Beck Alexander 23:41

Thank you felt really a pleasure and I really really appreciated your your insightful questions.

P

Philip Loring 23:49

With that, I want to say thank you to Jamie Beck Alexander, the inaugural director of Drawdown Labs, and thanks to you all for listening to the second episode of the second transition podcast. This episode of the second transition podcast was produced on the traditional lands and territories of the Washoe people in what is now known as Northern California. Funding for this podcast comes in part from the Arrell Food Institute, from the University of Guelph, and from boy said radio thanks also to the Benefiel brothers at the ClimatePod and to Ben Franta for letting me use a clip from the show. tuner next episode to talk about activism, my guest will be trickster artist and activist Ricardo Levins Morales.

P

Philip Loring 24:36

See you next time