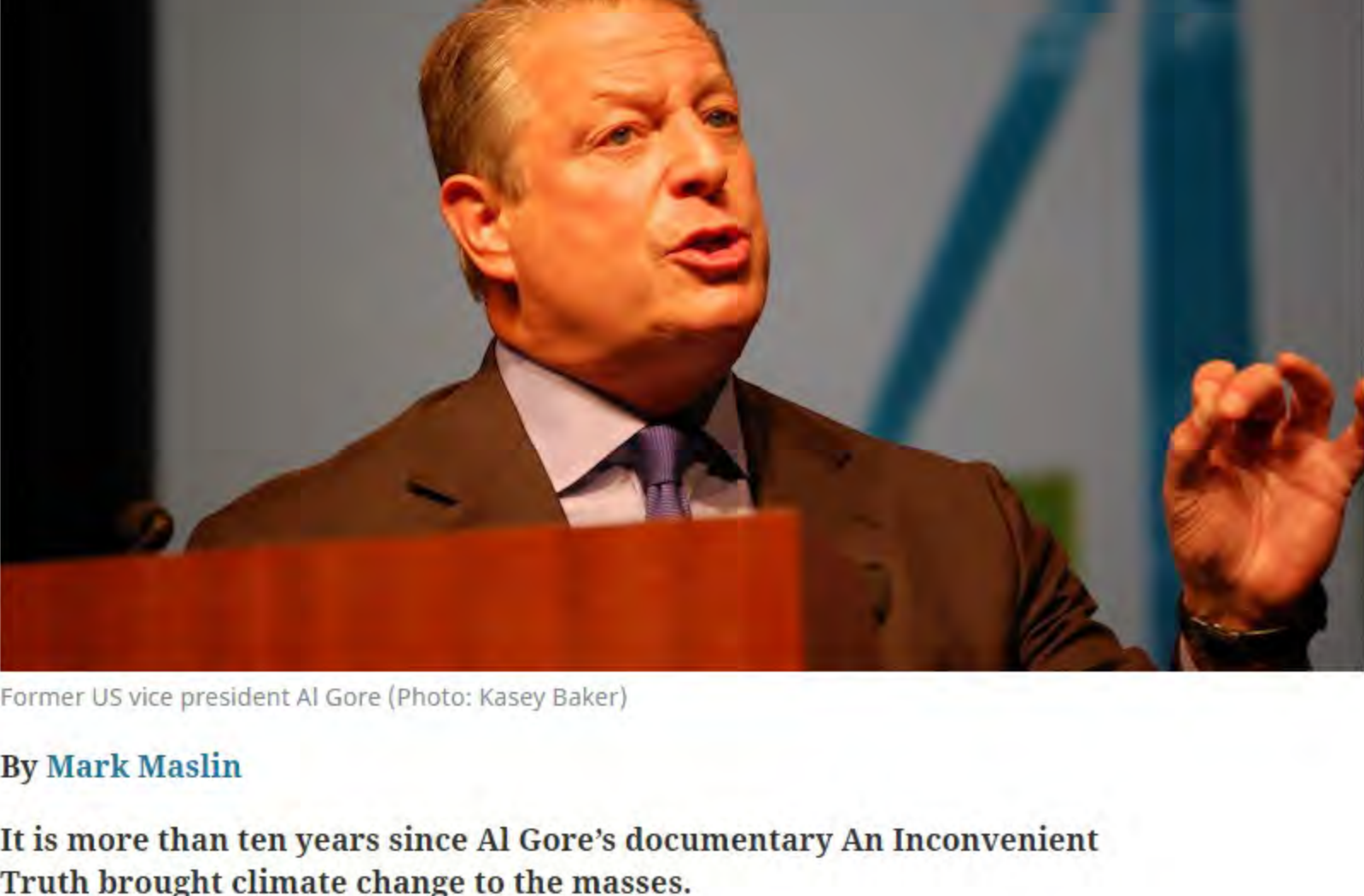


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Al Gore: ‘Many Republicans want to switch sides on climate change’

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The former US vice-president and climate campaigner has launched a new film and says “to fix the climate crisis we need to fix democracy”



Former US vice president Al Gore (Photo: Kasey Baker)

By [Mark Maslin](#)

It is more than ten years since Al Gore's documentary An Inconvenient Truth brought climate change to the masses.

At its heart, it showed the former US vice-president giving a comprehensive global warming slide show – warning of the dire consequences if we do nothing about the climate crisis.

The film grossed \$24m in the US and \$26m internationally. Not only was the film a financial success but it was also a critical success and won two Oscars. An Inconvenient Truth has been credited for raising international public awareness of climate change and re-energising the environmental movement. The documentary has been [included in science curricula](#) in schools around the world. It was also instrumental in Al Gore sharing the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

A decade on, Gore has made a follow-up entitled [An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power](#). This film updates us on the major changes that have occurred over the past decade; including the accelerated retreat of the ice caps, extreme weather events and the historic signing of the [Paris Climate Agreement](#) in 2015.

The sequel is different to the first film – it is much more biographical and focuses on how Gore became the great climate change communicator and what he has been doing with his charities to build awareness and train future climate change leaders around the world.

Had this film been released a year ago, its optimistic tone would not have seemed out of place. It is almost as if the filmmakers had assumed there would be a different election result. The film has been hastily edited to include [Donald Trump's withdrawal](#) from the Paris Agreement. The end of the film seems out of kilter with the optimistic tone of the rest of the film, which occasionally borders on triumphant.

I interviewed Gore and we mainly focused on politics and how to deal with bipartisanship. We both believe that it will be in the [political realm](#) where the fight to solve climate change will be won or lost.



Mark Maslin: It's clear that the first film had a huge impact. So what is the motivation behind you doing a sequel?

Al Gore: When we reached the ten-year anniversary of the first movie it seemed like an appropriate time to present what's new in the previous decade – and there have been two very big changes and a third that occurred during the filming of the movie.

The first is that unfortunately the climate-related extreme weather events have of course become far more common and more destructive. Mother nature is speaking up in a very persuasive way.

The second big change is that the solutions are here now. A decade ago you could see them on the horizon but you had to have the technology experts reassure you that they're coming, that they'll be here – well now they're here. And for example electricity from wind and solar has fallen so quickly in price that in many regions it's much cheaper than electricity from fossil fuels and soon will be almost everywhere.

Electric cars are becoming affordable. Batteries are now beginning to decline sharply in price which will be a real game-changer for the energy industry. LEDs and hundreds of new far more efficient technologies are helping to stabilise and soon reduce emissions.

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I was struck in the middle of your film by a profound statement: “To fix the climate crisis we need to fix democracy”. And then the film moved on to another topic. How do you think we can fix our democracies now in the 21st century?

Well, big money has hacked our democracy even before Putin did. And it accompanied the transition from the printing press to television, when all of a sudden candidates – especially in the US – were made to feel they have to spend all their time begging rich people and special interests for money so they can buy more TV ads and their opponents.

And that's really given an enormous unhealthy and toxic degree of influence to lobbyists and special interests. Now just as television replaced the printing press, internet-based media are beginning to displace television and once again open up the doorways to the public forum for individuals who can use knowledge and the best available evidence.

If you believe in democracy as I do and if you believe in harvesting the wisdom of crowds, then the interaction of free people exchanging the best available evidence of what's more likely to be true than not will once again push us toward a government of by and for the people. One quick example. Last year the Bernie Sanders campaign – regardless of what you might think about his agenda – proved that it is now possible on the internet to run a very credible nationwide campaign without taking any money from lobbyists and special interests or billionaires. Instead, you can raise money in small amounts from individuals on the internet and then be accountable to them and not have to worry about being accountable to the big donors.

Report: Republican ‘climate caucus’ offered little support for Paris deal

There was a poignant moment in the film when you're sitting in front of the Senate hearing – and there's a Republican senator and he's just not hearing what you're saying. In a two-party system, how do you reach out to those Republicans – and some of the Democrats – that still don't get climate change?

Well, part of it is related to the changes necessary in the financing of campaigns. A famous journalist in the US, over a century ago, Upton Sinclair wrote: ‘it is difficult to get a man to understand something if his salary depends upon him not understanding it’. And if you substitute campaign finance for salary, you get part of the answer.

But I know for a fact that there are many Republican members of the Senate and House who know that what they've been advocating is wrong and would like to crawl back from the end of the limb they've put themselves on. And as more and more people express the passionate view that we've got to solve the climate crisis that can give them the backbone to change their position, some of them already have.

There's a new Noah's Ark caucus [the Climate Solutions Caucus](#) in the Congress – a reference to the biblical deluge but also a reference to the fact that they only can join by twos one Democrat one Republican – and more Republicans are now switching sides.

You've done a great job at communicating climate change around the world – but perhaps you being a very prominent, highly-respected liberal Democrat has incensed some Republicans and actually hardened their view against climate change. Do you feel that's fair?

I don't think that's fair at all and in fact there's been a great deal of social science research that shows that's completely inaccurate. You may know [Joe Romm](#) – a great climate blogger – he has compiled all that research. For two and a half years after the first movie, bipartisanship increased significantly on this issue. The Republican nominee in 2008, John McCain, had a very responsible position on this issue.

But what happened was in the wake of the Great Recession the carbon polluters launched the Tea Party movement – some of them joined on their own, but they actually provided the seed money and insisted that climate denial be a part of that political movement. The polluters have done exactly what the tobacco companies did years ago when they hired actors and dressed them up as doctors and put them on camera to say there are no health problems with cigarettes – 100m people died as a result.

Well, now the carbon polluters have taken that same approach hiring the same PR firms spending more than a billion dollars to put out pseudo science and false information. They're not necessarily going to win the debate. They just want to give the appearance that there is a debate – in order to paralyse the political process. But people are seeing through it now.

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Afterthoughts

What struck me about the interview – and also the film – is that Gore is making two very clear points. First is that now all the solutions to climate change exist. There is a wonderful sequence in the movie where he meets [Dale Ross, the mayor of Georgetown in Texas](#). The mayor describes Georgetown as the reddest city in the reddest county in Texas – and he's a conservative Republican. But he sees moving toward renewable energy, as just making sense. As his job is to deliver the best value for money to his taxpaying citizens and wind and solar are the cheapest energy source.

The second is that Gore makes the profound statement that Western democracies are broken and in order to solve the climate crisis they need to fix democracy. In the interview, Gore suggested that big business has bought many politicians and this must be unpicked so that they are free to make informed unbiased decisions.

He sees social media as the great leveller as campaigns can be run on much smaller budgets reducing the power of party donors. He also suggests in the film that educating both politicians and the electorate on the damages of climate change will make a significant difference. But this is the same rhetoric we here from intellectuals all the time – if the poor people were properly educated they would make the [correct political decisions](#).

In the [post-truth era](#) this neatly sidesteps issues of growing inequality, poverty and a general feeling of disenfranchisement.

In this way, An Inconvenient Truth was the right movie at the right time and An Inconvenient Sequel is the wrong movie at the wrong time. At the end of the film, Gore makes an impassioned rally speech – part Winston Churchill and part Martin Luther King – which even the hardened sceptic couldn't help but admire. He finishes by declaring the tag line of the film: “It's time to fight like your world depends on it.”

Given the forces of big business and Trumpism aligned against climate action, we all need to be as passionate, optimistic and committed to a new safer cleaner future as Gore – because he is right, the world does depend on us acting now.

Mark Maslin is a professor of physical geography at University College London. This article was first published on [The Conversation](#).

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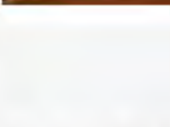
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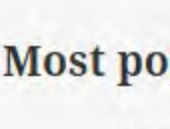
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