

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 67 February 2011
Clicktivism By-passes Inside Track To Harry Potter Forest

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It may be nothing new to many readers of this *Newsletter* but 'online campaigning' is eating into the political space until now dominated by 'traditional' campaign groups. Until recently, solely online campaign groups have tended to focus on different (often newer) issues from large established groups, and/or have serviced more activist, often younger communities with a more 'radical' agenda.

The strategies of many of these groups, using the internet primarily for 'independent' media communication channels, and as an organizing tool, have often been rather naive – and hence they have often been viewed by those they seek to change, such as governments and large corporations, as less seriously threatening than the more established groups which have multiple channels of influence, and deeply embedded connections within the 'policy communities'.

The 'clicktivist' debate is one such example – (Google Gladwell and Guardian and clicktivism for a quick sample) – only those with a very limited view of how change works could think that it was a serious question to ask whether purely online campaigns could replace all other forms of power or influence. No well-informed 'cyber campaigners' seemed to think so but it entertained the green media blogosphere for a while.

But recent developments in the UK, while not even in the same dimension let alone the same league of seriousness as the nation changing developments in Egypt or Tunisia, show that, as Gladwell might say, something of a 'tipping point' may have been reached.

Back in January when I should have been writing you a Newsletter – I'm sorry, I didn't – I wrote in a piece [1] in 'Charity Insight' magazine:

'Web 2.0 provided people with the opportunity to generate their own content and interact with others within a virtual context. Out of this, many campaign groups have been founded such as 38degrees.org.uk, MoveOn.org, avaaz.org and getup.org.au. They offer campaign-organising systems which potentially threaten the slower-moving NGOs that have been built on a model of in-house knowledge and expertise and a largely passive supporter base'.

'Groups such as these are enjoying much success in enlisting supporters, having mobilised nearly 9 million people around the world. In the UK, since its inception in 2009, 38 Degrees has facilitated nearly a million 'actions' by 265,000 individuals on topics from health services to disclosure of lobbying to factory farming (see poster). Like a political party or media outlet, and unlike most conventional NGOs which sit in an issue-specific silo, its attention wanders far and wide'.

Sooner than I expected, that threat to conventional NGOs manifested itself in a quintessentially British, highly domestic issue, in heartland territory for some of the oldest, most established, highly conventional NGOs. The subject? The proposed sell-off of Britain's state owned forests.

Britain's most venerable Environment Correspondent, Geoffery Lean almost spluttered with annoyance in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* [2]:

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'Even though environmental pressure groups successfully routed previous attempts to sell off the forests, this time they have been nowhere to be seen. Their absence speaks volumes about the increasing irrelevance and near-terminal timidity of bodies such as Friends of the Earth (FoE), the Ramblers' Association and the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) ...'

Lean allied himself to Jonathon Porritt – a former head of FoE – who accused the groups of a "massive failure of collective leadership".

Tony Juniper – another former FoE executive director – told Lean: *"This is the first major test of the Government's environmental credentials and hardly an eyebrow has been raised by any of Britain's main green groups."*

CPRE, wrote Lean, was *'once so strong and savvy that it seriously worried governments, but [is] now ineffective and largely ignored WWF-UK (aka the World Wildlife Fund) makes much of 2011 being the International Year of Forests, but does not seem to have said a word about the threat to them in England. The Ramblers' Association, which spearheaded a successful campaign to scupper a previous privatisation bid in the 1990s, only posted its (qualified) concerns on Wednesday... The Woodland Trust, the National Trust, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds have been pussyfooting around'.*

Lean contrasted the near invisibility and silence of the established campaign groups with the activities of 38 Degrees, Britain's home grown version of Avaaz:

'By contrast, the fast-growing internet action group, 38 degrees, started campaigning almost immediately after the Government's plans was first revealed ... last October. How so? Unlike the complacent leadership of most of the pressure groups, it listens to its members and encourages them to suggest campaigns: it received more than 1,000 emails urging action within hours of the story breaking.'

An *'extraordinary public revolt'* was now going on wrote Lean, which *'is threatening to shake the Coalition'*. 80,000 people had signed a petition against the sales [471,301 had signed when I checked while writing this *Newsletter*] and *'Britain's substantially resourced – and insufferably self-important – environmental pressure groups have played no part in it. Only now are they scrambling sclerotically to try to avoid being left behind'*.

So was this the power of clicktivism? Well, yes and no. The threat to sell off Britain's national forests had alarmed and angered some well-heeled local 'communities' across 'Middle England' because they foresaw a loss of access, of care and of environmental quality. They had started their own campaigns such as www.handsoffourforest.org working primarily in the Forest of Dean (featured in the latest *Harry Potter* film), and 38Degrees provided a lightning rod for national and local concern, which the old established NGOs failed to do. Hence they were side-lined in the national conversation. The larger older NGOs either didn't see it coming or couldn't organise themselves to react.

According to Geoff Lean and Jonathan Porritt in the *Daily Telegraph* *'The green groups almost all respond that they have been "working behind the scenes". This is "not true"'. According to people have spoken to, this is not quite right. The 'green groups', ie the established NGOs, had been in a stand-off with the government. They met with government officials and told them that*

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they might be prepared to take on some discarded government assets – both ‘forests’ and nature reserves (from the dismemberment of the agency Natural England) but at a price. They simply lacked the resources to do it alone. As reported in *The Independent* [3] the large NGOs had been privately trying to bargain with the government about the terms of a partial take-over since last autumn, and, I’m told, had agreed amongst themselves to keep quiet about it. The local uprisings and the 38Degrees petition seem to have wrong-footed them, as no terms had been agreed.

With a quietly English form of bedlam breaking out, the National Trust (3m members) have since broken ranks, along with the Woodland Trust, in making a public bid to set terms for what should be done – belatedly and much to the annoyance of other major groups now left even more stranded by events. I rarely say this but I agree with Jonathan Porritt, who told Geoff Lean, that the establishment NGOs “*have made themselves look foolish and irrelevant*”.

The sale of Britain’s forest is a domestic concern of little interest to most readers of this *Newsletter* (the great majority of you are living elsewhere in the world) and scarcely measures up against the threats to humanity or the environment that you are trying to grapple with but the dynamic between the old established NGO model, publics, and government, is well nigh universal in campaigning.

The take-out for the mainframe NGOs (a kinder word than the ‘dinosaur’ tag which many of them even use themselves in private), is that the agile online surfers and collators of public mood such as Avaaz and 38Degrees not only can mobilise their own base constituency who live ‘inline’ but increasingly, can step into the deepest, sleepest hollows of old school politics between the aristocracy of NGO-land and formal government, and ‘speak for the people’, taking as much space from NGOs as they do from the media. They are a rising phenomenon.

Inglehart Your Time Has Come

Readers of these *Newsletters* may remember pieces (eg # 54) on how Ron Inglehart and his co-workers from the World Values Survey have long charted how the shifting proportions of social values at the individual level, lead to change at a national level. Anyone wanting to understand what has been going on in Egypt, indeed across parts of the Arab world, ought to have a look at *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, by Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, (Cambridge University Press, 2005). Not a light read but very interesting.

In a society like Egypt, I think they would say, we are seeing the political expression of ‘self-expression values’: ie the demand in the political sphere, for freedoms and self-determination which have been experienced in other spheres, such as in commerce, careers, entertainment and arts. In the end, democracy follows.

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Get The Benefits Right

One of the campaign basics described at this website [4] and in the *Book How to Win Campaigns* is PSB – being able to specify the Problem, the Solution and the Benefit of a campaign ask or offer.

Quite often campaigners struggle to specify the ‘benefit’, that is, the benefit as it applies to the audience of the moment – be they media viewers, listeners or others. So thinking about ‘benefits’ is usually time well spent. But ‘benefits’ can also lead us astray. Last year I was asked to help re-strategize a campaign backed by an array of NGOs and civil society organisations, seeking a change in a national law. They had identified a range of arguments or reasons for what they wanted in ‘benefit’ terms, and wanted to use these in recruiting a diverse range of supporters.

So far so good but the trouble was, the more you looked at it, the more problematic these arguments seemed; the difficulty being that in almost every case, while they did offer benefits, there were easier and more reliable ways to achieve the benefit. So although benefits might occur, they were unlikely to build a coalition, or even a majority, because there was competition from other options for getting the same result.

The test for a useful benefit therefore has to be that the gain looks certain, and it looks an easier and more reliable way to achieve that gain, with lower costs, than other options.

How to Win Campaigns: Communications for Change (Edition 2, pub Earthscan 2010) is available at <http://www.earthscan.co.uk/tabid/102418/Default.aspx>

[1] Brave New World, *Charity Insight Magazine* 24 January 2011
http://www.charityinsight.com/features/strategy/brave-new-world_24_1_2011

[2] Green groups lost in the woods - Forest sell-off: the silence of the Greens, Geoffery Lean, *Daily Telegraph* February 6 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthcomment/geoffrey-lean/8304192/Green-groups-lost-in-the-woods.html>

[3] Wardens plan to rescue 140 nature reserves, Michael McCarthy, Environment Editor, February 2 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/wardens-plan-to-rescue-140-nature-reserves-2201500.html>

[4] http://www.campaignstrategy.org/book_extracts/constructing_raspb_propositions_1.html

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HOW TO WIN CAMPAIGNS pub April 7 2005 Earthscan by Chris Rose see

http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/1853839620/ref=ed_ra_of_dp/202-6151204-2796606 or from <http://www.earthscan.co.uk/?tabid=102418>