

# **Environmental NGOs, Elections and Community Organising**

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The environment movement is alive and well in Australia. After a decade or so of being lost in a neo-liberal wilderness, in a maze of internal governance and in parliamentary corridors, the movement is growing anew. The new movement is multi-faceted, young, dynamic, educated, politically savvy and spread throughout society. There are new organisations with a fresh theoretical base that are bringing about the revitalisation and this is impacting on older national organisations.

I want to focus on the main action that characterise this revitalised movement – its interest in community organising – ‘building power’ as the new jargon says. I will also comment on the movement’s renewed interest in electoral work in marginal electorates, and discuss where this revitalised movement might be going – on its future, which is the topic of this workshop.

### **Neoliberal Wilderness, Internal Governance and Parliamentary Corridors.**

I was one of those in the 1980s who sparked the move towards working in parliamentary corridors, lobbying Ministers, working the factions and mixing with party powerbrokers. There is no doubt that the Hawke government was one of the most productive periods for the environment movement in terms of significant outcomes (Toyne and Balderstone 2003). Importantly, the period began with community organising - characteristic of the Franklin Dam issue when thousands marched in the streets and local Tasmanian Wilderness Society groups blossomed throughout the country at an electorate level. Subsequently, the movement lost its way during the 1990s due to a number of factors. Lack of rigorous analysis may have been a factor. Alec Marr points to some parts of the movement imagining that their interests lay with the Labor Party, because of the positive relationship with Labor under Hawke (Marr 2008). Failure of analysis was a factor, but the situation was more complex.

As PM in the early 1990s, Keating was openly antagonistic towards the environment movement (Economou 1996, Parlane 2010, Staples 2013). Both academics and activists were struggling to find a response to the neoliberalism that pervaded all parts of society, and in the middle of the decade, the Howard government introduced a new language of public choice theory vis-a-vis NGOs that even academics struggled to fully recognise. In 2002, Marian Sawyer started to interpret what was happening with her paper, ‘Governing for the Mainstream’, in which she described the behaviour of the government in silencing NGOs (Sawyer 2002). It was not until 2004, when Maddison, Dennis and Hamilton did their comprehensive survey *Silencing Dissent*, that political scientists began to fully reflect what was happening (Maddison, Dennis & Hamilton 2004). Public choice language was present in statements by the Howard government about NGOs and I have described it as an attempt to change the nature of our democracy - to ascribe neoliberal market values on the behaviour of NGOs and the environment movement (Staples 2006).

Part of that language was to accuse NGOs of not being ‘accountable’. I have argued that it was part of a public choice narrative in which NGOs, who are not elected government representatives, are therefore described as ‘interfering’ with the market and ‘not being accountable’ (Staples 2008). Be that as it may, the movement interpreted this as an attack on their internal governance. There was much energy spent on new constitutions, on board restructuring for skills in management, finance and fundraising, and on employing professionally trained specialists.

An emphasis on improved governance was needed, but it came at a cost. The community organising that had galvanised the movement during the Franklin Dam campaign and the forestry wars got lost in an aura of respectability and managerialism. The new breed of cautious professionals on boards and heading organisations was unaccustomed to strong advocacy with government. At the same time, the ‘silencing’ attacks became more marked after the Coalition took control of both Houses of Parliament in 2004. The period saw much self-censorship by NGOs themselves.

## **Elections.**

For the four elections between 1983 and 1990, ACF and TWS endorsed Labor, or the Democrats with Labor as a second preference. They ran sophisticated marginal seat campaigns that had varying effects, but it was not a sustainable strategy and it had to go. Hal Wootten, President of ACF criticised it in 1987 (Wootten 1987). He argued that it was necessary to keep a neutral position towards political parties, because governments change and a different party will come to power.

The success of the endorsement strategy also contributed to its downfall. In 1990, it was the environment movement work in marginal electorates that was the defining factor in returning the Labor government to power. Working closely with the ACF, Senator Graham Richardson proposed a Labor strategy of relying on Democrat preferences (Lambert 2008; Kelly 1994; Richardson 2008). His approach was vindicated when the ALP received only 39 per cent of the primary vote, the Coalition 43 per cent, but the Democrats almost doubled their vote to 11% nationally. In the nine marginal electorates where the environment movement campaigned, the Democrat vote was 13.4 per cent, which was crucial in returning Labor candidates. Commentators conceded at the time that the environment vote had won the election for Labor (Richardson 2008; Balderstone 2008; Kelly 1994).

Despite this, it did not win friends for the environment movement *inside* Labor. In fact, any debt to the environment movement was resented. With Keating coming to power soon afterwards, and the neoliberal ministers asserting themselves, the legacy of Hawke and everything environmental was dismissed by Labor (Staples 2012). The formation of the Australian Greens in 1992 also meant that endorsement and working closely with political parties now became more complicated for the environment movement. With the election of the Coalition in 1996, not only was the unsustainable practice of endorsement off the agenda, but the movement was struggling to cope with the attacks on its advocacy. Organisations pulled back not just from endorsement, but were very cautious in their approach to elections. Rating of party policies at election time was used tentatively, but elections became a fraught area and marginal electorate work fell away. The attacks on advocacy, the dominance of managerialism and a strategy that placed some NGOs too close to Labor together resulted in the movement weakening its advocacy and losing its way.

## **Where is the Australian Environment Movement Today?**

How have we got from a movement that lost its way, to one that is ‘multi-faceted, young, dynamic, educated, politically savvy and spread throughout society’? The latest energy comes from a strong US influence with a specific theoretical base of community organising, and from new groups of climate change and anti-coal activists.

Some US influence started almost a decade ago. GetUp was founded in 2005 by Jeremy Heimans and David Madden, two young Australian graduates of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government (GetUp 2014). They modelled it on the US group, MoveOn.org. Its brief is wider than the environment, and at first environment did not figure largely in its campaigns. GetUp has evolved during the past decade, from a largely stand-alone organisation to one that co-operates and joins with other groups, now frequently including the environment movement. The first specific US influence on the environment movement was in 2006 when Al Gore's Climate Reality Project began offering activist trainings in association with ACF in Australia (The Climate Reality Project Australia 2014). More recently in 2012, 350.org, the US organisation begun by US journalist Bill McKibbin a few years earlier, started its Australian operations. The organisation takes its name from a 2007 paper by James Hansen proposing that 350 ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> is a safe upper limit to avoid a climate tipping point. It has grown rapidly promoting a divestment campaign targeting fossil fuel companies and the banks financing them. It is also supporting direct action at the proposed Maules Creek coalmine in NSW (350.org Australia 2014).

The new energy and dynamism I have identified has been building for a number of years. The emergence of climate change as an issue has seen countless new groups emerge. The energy and dynamism has been a combination of,

- a) theory and practice, brought from the US by environment movement exchanges with the Sierra Club, as well as trade union influence from US experience. The theory and practice have a strong focus on community organising and some reference Collective Impact theory<sup>1</sup>.
- b) this focus on community organising has coincided and built upon the emergence of a number of local organisations. The most important of these is Lock the Gate – the movement of rural landholders opposing coal seam gas.

### **Community Organising**

Mark Wakeham, CEO of Environment Victoria, emphasises that it is still early days with community organising. There is much talk, but few groups are doing it well. Wakeham points to a meeting in 2005 between unionists, church groups and environmental organisations at which union groups introduced ideas and theories they had brought from the US on community organising. Prior to this, Wakeham characterises the environment movement as relying excessively on rational policy development and underestimation of its own power and potential influence – doing good rational policy work when a sympathetic government was in power and just holding the line when a government was unsympathetic (Wakeham 2014).

The theoretical basis of the new activism owes something to Collective Impact theory that is used in the corporate world, but many in the movement reject what they see as fashionable adherence to theory. They point to the practice of community organising and networking by the Sierra Club and US unions as more important for the Australian environment movement. The theoretical basis of the current approach is strong on using community organising to 'build power'. It attempts to develop deep roots in the community and real knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Collective Impact theory focuses on collaborative work across groups to solve a common problem. It is currently associated with the work of Stanford Social Innovation Review where examples tend to be across government, business and NGOs. Its use in Australia is more closely associated with organizing across groups within the NGO sector.

between neighbours who know one another and work for a common goal. This is seen as being the key to influencing both governments and corporations.

The new activism is being spread by both ad hoc training sessions and by more structured training. The most significant of the latter is that offered by the Change Agency in Sydney, which runs Community Organising Fellowship training over a six month period comprising four sessions totalling 22 days in all. An experienced mentor supports each of the thirty or so students. Participants are not just self-selecting but are strategically chosen with the aim of strengthening the environment movement. There is a geographic spread, as well as a variety of types of organisations represented. There is a focus on community organising skills, but also campaigning skills and an emphasis on the need for networking and working co-operatively across different groups. The training sessions themselves are conducive to co-operation between groups, because strong links are developed amongst the participants at the residential training sessions.

Online campaigning has not only impacted on the way campaigning is done, but it has also influenced the shape of the movement. Geographically diverse groups can now keep in touch by a multitude of online means to progress a common aim. The dynamism of the new groups and networks is intimately tied up with their online presence and their power is their network presence online. For example, a closed email list of coal and gas activist groups, with many well-informed and experienced campaigners can share sophisticated comments from some of the best minds in the movement with less experienced campaigners. It demonstrates both flexibility and speed of response from many groups across the country, as well as keeping the groups informed of the latest research, sharing campaigning activities and staying abreast of government/corporate activities.

The new climate action groups hold annual gatherings that provide capacity building for individuals as well as strategic planning opportunities. They attract activists from all states of Australia. The gatherings are notable for drawing participant groups from different networks – reinforcing the development of co-operation across different organisations. The personal contacts from these national gatherings reinforce and strengthen online relationships. Many of the new groups have eschewed government support, instead existing on donations and volunteer activity.

Another new element to environment group activity is the nature of interactions with business. Lack of government support has led to some organisations such as WWF becoming involved in endorsement of products. In particular, the large international NGOs have been strongly criticised for relations with corporate (LeBaron 2013). However, there have also been alliances in which environmental NGOs are working with alternative energy companies, often small in size, to further reduction in carbon emissions. The failure of government to introduce policies that significantly reduce emissions is resulting in progressive business and environmental NGOs taking action into their own hands to the mutual benefit of both.

### **Lock the Gate**

Chris Harris claims that opposition to unconventional gas drilling ‘led by the national Lock the Gate movement is arguably the single most important community movement since the moratorium marches of the early 1970s’ (Harris 2014). Harris was a significant activist during the Franklin Dam campaign and his judgement is supported by a lifetime of policy and advocacy practice. Lock the Gate was formed in 2010 by a coalition of farmers and activists

in Queensland and NSW. It has now spread to all states although still strongest in Queensland and NSW. It is a campaign involving tens of thousands of people, mostly farmers. A large proportion of them have never been involved in any political activity before and many come from a tradition of conservative country values. Harris claims that it is politicising a new generation.

Lock the Gate's strategy builds on the strength of rural communities. It is now linked to the new breed of young city coal and gas activists. Many of these activists have been empowered by the Change Agency Community Organising Fellowships or similar trainings that have developed with Sierra Club or Obama campaign inspiration. This new generation of activists is the generation that will be most heavily impacted by climate change. They have been exposed to environmental and climate change education in school. They are the online generation and are also sceptical of advertising and public relations. One of the most notable features is the way the many groups understand the need to work together co-operatively. It is a fresh new approach that is different from ego-driven leadership and silo-like competition for resources that has often been a negative aspect of the movement in the past. On a trip to the Galilee Basin in April 2014 with 40 anti-coal and gas activists from every state in Australia, I was struck by the campaigning sophistication and the high degree of co-operation shown between the many groups represented. While many may not have known about Collective Impact theory, their practice was already influenced by its emphasis on co-operation between groups.

Lock the Gate is a very significant movement that threatens traditional links within the Australian political system. Vestiges of agrarian socialism and independent rural suspicion of authority combine with self interest against coal seam gas exploration on rural properties. Overlaid on this is community organising that builds on pre-existing rural networks. When this is combined with the enthusiasm of young city activists, it is an exciting new political force. The conservative parties must view with alarm rallies against coal seam gas at which yellow Lock the Gate triangles mingle equally with Australian Greens triangles.

### **Electoral Activism.**

Electoral activism in marginal electorates has returned. There is some cross-fertilisation occurring between community-based election campaigns run by the Australian Greens and community organising by environment groups. However, the trend is also separate from any work by the Australian Greens. Many environmental activists have been schooled in the work of the Obama campaigns, and they see community organising as intimately connected to taking action in marginal electorates. There is no intention of endorsing political parties. Scorecards on party policies have long ago replaced that. The emphasis is on promoting their issue at the time of the election, particularly in marginal seats. For example, for the Victorian election of November 2014 I am aware of five groups working in marginal seats. They are Beyond Zero Emissions, Lock the Gate, Friends of the Earth, Solar Citizens and Environment Victoria.

By far the most sophisticated and developed approach to marginal electorate activism is that of Environment Victoria (EV), the peak Victorian organisation that has both individual and group membership. Some EV staff have undertaken the Change Agency Community Organising Fellowship training. EV began planning as long as three years ago for the November 2014 state election. They first approached some of their major donors to pledge a three year program of funding. The first year was spent identifying and publicising the

shortcomings of the current state Coalition government. The second year was identifying and publicising alternative policies. This included an ambitious project working with Victorian progressive businesses to develop an alternative economic strategy for Victoria based around sustainable environmental practices. The strategy was launched by John Hewson former Liberal leader, and is now being promoted by the participating businesses, such as VicSuper. The third step has been to develop community groups in key marginal electorates. Over 800 volunteers have been identifying swinging voters, doorknocking and talking to those who are prepared to 'vote for the environment'. This has involved keeping in touch with these voters and updating them on policies of the parties. There is a shopfront in Frankston, a suburb not traditionally seen as sympathetic to the environment, and the energy and enthusiasm of the volunteers harks back to 1980s elections. Mark Wakeham, CEO of EV, emphasises the long-term strategic planning that has gone into this marginal seat campaigning (Wakeham 2014).

In a state in which the Coalition government holds a one-seat majority and many marginal seats will change hands on less than 200 votes, the campaign is having significant impact on the major parties. However, Jane Stabb, community organiser at Environment Victoria, sees her work as being for the long term. Many of the state seats in which EV is working coincide with federal marginal seats that will be relevant at the next federal election, but more importantly Stabb sees the social and co-operative nature of the relationships that have been built up as being long-term assets for the community and people involved. The practice of community organising creates local leaders so that the group becomes self-sufficient. Stabb claims that she has created structures that will continue if she or EV were to withdraw (Stabb 2014).

### **Traditional Larger Groups**

The traditional large national environment groups such as ACF, the Wilderness Society, WWF and Greenpeace are also experiencing change. Their bureaucracy and the extent to which they embraced managerialism makes them slower to respond (Wakeham 2014), but they are reacting to the challenge of the dynamism of the newer climate groups. A July 2014 meeting of the national groups and state conservation councils in Sydney saw an emphasis on collaboration and 'Collective Impact' campaigning. There was recognition by the larger groups of their need to develop an overarching strategic framework with the climate movement. The importance of biodiversity campaigning was recognised. There was discussion of how to merge biodiversity and climate campaigning. From a campaign to stop federal government abdicating responsibility for environmental regulation has grown a new alliance called, the Places you Love. It includes ACF, TWS, WWF, Greenpeace, some of the conservation councils and numerous others.

### **The Future.**

The low point of environmental activism was probably about 2004 when the Howard government was in its ascendancy and the movement had not found its new direction. Interestingly, it also coincided with the original self-publication of Shellenberger and Nordhaus', 'The Death of Environmentalism' that had a significant effect in the US (Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2004). Since that time the Australian movement has been reinventing itself.

Community organising is back in a new sophisticated form and marginal electorate action has returned. There is a new interest in working across groups and in co-operation instead of competition - at least amongst the newer groups. The climate action groups are spearheading this renewal and the national groups are responding. Wakeham points also to leadership renewal in the movement citing ACF, the NSW Nature Conservation Council, the Conservation Councils of WA and SA and Environment Victoria as having new leaders, mostly representing a younger generation of activists (Wakeham 2014).

There are difficulties to overcome. The face of the movement is still very Anglo and multiculturalism has still made little impact. Male leaders still dominate in some areas, but there are a number of new strong female leaders. As in the past, women dominate throughout the lower ranks. Climate change has pushed the natural environment off the agenda and even biodiversity does not get much coverage. This is despite *New Scientist* identifying loss of biodiversity as the most advanced of the various impacts of climate change (Marshall 2013). The urgent need for action on the climate can also be an excuse to ignore broader philosophical issues, but that has always been the case. There are dangers in moving too close to business seeking income for NGOs. Failure to value the 'brand' and 'clean' reputation of environmental groups means the reputation of the movement can be tarnished by inappropriate alignment with the corporate sector in a search for funds.

The fossil fuel industry and the major parties have many links, as Guy Pearse reminds us (Pearse 2007). The climate change movement is having an effect in board rooms and in markets. (The divestment campaign has seen Unisuper offer a fossil free product, smaller banks such as Bendigo and bankmecu affirm their fossil free status, various university councils and the 4 major banks come under increasing pressure to divest from fossil fuels and one coal project at Bentley in northern NSW has been discontinued.) In particular, the divestment campaign and the active pressures from Lock the Gate are placing economic pressure on the fossil fuel industry. The Coalition government is responding with threats to remove the tax deductible status of environment groups, and to change the *Competition and Consumer Act* to prevent lobbying against companies (Staples 2014). The threat of multiple ATO audits, a tactic used under the Howard government, remains. This presents a challenge to the older established movement that is vulnerable to changes in regulations and the law governing use of tax deductions in fundraising. Currently, the Tasmanian government leads the way in legislation aimed at stopping freedom of speech of environmental NGOs, with its *Workplace (Protection from Protesters) Bill 20114* (EDO Tasmania 2014). As the movement continues to pressure the mining and energy sectors on climate change attacks are likely to escalate both from government and from the fossil fuel industry.

A positive element for the movement related to its pressure on the fossil fuel industry is that behind all the Australian campaigning is an international economy where the international regulatory environment and the rise in renewables are beginning to overpower traditional fossil fuels. There is much talk of the 'death spiral' of the electricity generating industry and of the fossil fuel industry itself. China and India have introduced policies in recent months that will heavily impact on the international long-term viability of the fossil fuel industry. Against the backdrop of these economic realities, the coal and gas campaigners are likely to see some significant wins in the next few years and this will only embolden the movement nationally.

Community organising and collaboration hold much promise for the environment movement. It is returning to its locus of power that was used during the Franklin campaign in the early 1980s - a position that is hard for any other interest to match. Jane Stabb has summarised this situation. She says that conservative opponents can spend money and even set up Astroturf<sup>2</sup> groups, but they cannot replicate the power of a community of dedicated individuals who know one another as neighbours and who join together on an issue with passion and commitment (Stabb 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> Astroturfing is the practice of masking the sponsors of a message or organization (e.g. political, advertising, religious or public relations) to make it appear as though it originates from and is supported by grassroots participant(s). It is a practice intended to give the statements or organizations more credibility by withholding information about the source's financial connection.

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