

Climate Movement 2011

FAILURE, POWER AND RENEWAL

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The Arnhem Land story of the first death in the Dreamtime tells us that after the funeral and grieving for the first dead man is over, the first morning star rises — releasing the spirit of the dead into the Universe.

There are a lot of spirits of former struggles and movements out there, morning stars that offer us lessons and guidance from both their successes and failures. In these times of climate chaos and confusion, I like to think that those spirits of past movements are looking down on us, but they're probably heartbroken at what they're seeing, and we're not learning the lessons they have to teach us.

After this summer of floods and fires, cyclones and heat waves, I have never been more scared about how quickly our climate is changing. And I have never been more scared about our movement's apparent inability to win on this.

It's been a very long time since we've had major environmental legislation passed in the federal Parliament, we are struggling to get an effective price on carbon passed, and the number of Australians who don't accept the science of climate change has increased significantly in the last five years.

The majority of the environment movement in Australia is failing — at least in so far as you define failing as not winning the things we need to win to preserve clean air, clean water, clean soil and a stable climate for my generation and those to come.

I'm not normally one to criticize the movement. I'd much rather be criticizing our opponents — the fossil fuel lobby and their allies. I've been part of this movement since I was fourteen — that's half my life. I love it dearly and I see how hard everyone works, and we usually have enough to deal with without self-criticism.

It's All About Power

But the time has come to be honest. We are failing because as a whole the Australian environment movement does not understand power, has not built power, and has failed to effectively exercise the power we have built.

To win campaigns we have to make it harder for those in power to continue with business as usual than it is for them to give into our demands. Yet currently, it's easier for politicians to continue with business as usual, and to give in to the demands of industry lobbyists from the coal, gas, mining, aluminium, cement and electricity generation industries — everyone, that is, except us.

So, what makes it easier for our politicians to give in to our demands than to continue with the status quo? Basic community organising principles tell us that the answer is majority, active opposition to the status quo and active support for a different path.

This means we have to **build** power in communities before we can **exercise it** in Canberra.

This isn't easy and it isn't quick, but we have at least two recent models of how community organising principles can be scaled up to national levels in Western industrialised countries like Australia.

Firstly, we can look to Obama's presidential campaign, and secondly, the rapid growth of the mega-churches in both Australia and America.

What do both of these movements have in common? They focused first and foremost on engaging individuals in ways that are meaningful to them. They placed the needs and hopes of ordinary people at the centre, spoke to their core values, and established ruthlessly efficient systems and infrastructure to organise people and train them to recruit and organise others.

Our movement could have done this. Small parts of it have done that. But I was born in 1983, the year the Franklin River was saved, and I genuinely don't know if the power of the environment movement has grown since then. Of course, the movement has won important victories, protected many special places, and achieved many things, but it didn't necessarily build long-term power whilst doing so.

The exception is the ability The Greens have shown to convert environmentalism into parliamentary power, but even then there's still a lot of work to do for The Greens to widen their base and reach new constituencies.

Once you've built power — power that comes from a genuine mass movement and deep public support, you can use it strategically in many ways. In 2005 I visited Montreal for the UN climate negotiations. That year, Canadian students shut down the state of Quebec to protest Tuition fee rises. 100,000 students marched in the streets. Students blocked the Port of Montreal, closed major highways, shut the casino, and occupied various Government offices. 300,000 students went on strike, closing almost all public higher education in Quebec for seven weeks. Needless to say, the Government caved in and they won their campaign.

Now, I'm not saying that this is necessarily how we would want to exercise our power in the environment movement, but we need to have the ability to do things on that scale, with that level of public support. Currently I don't think the entire Australian environment movement combined could shut down even one capital city for a day if we wanted to, let alone a whole state.

Sometimes when things fail it's OK. When our young volunteers make mistakes, we say don't worry, just learn from it, and start again.

But when it comes to the majority of our movement, and in the context of rapid climate change, when we are running so hard up against the limits of so many natural systems, the ultimate limit turns out to be time.

So I think environmentalism is failing, when we consider our existing power base, and the limit of time, but we do still have an opportunity to succeed. In that spirit, I have four suggestions for how to build power by engaging more people, more effectively and meaningfully.

1. Re-position ENGAGING PEOPLE as the centre of mainstream environmental NGOs

The major environmental NGOs have been effective at raising more money, employing new professional staff, and gaining greater access to power holders, but this hasn't translated into winning a bigger percentage of hearts and minds on the ground or into increased policy gains.

This is because most environment organisations have neglected to build their power base in communities to back up their relationships in Canberra. Most have deprioritised building the power and influence even of their own members, let alone the general community.

I want to see the big NGOs out on the street marching or doing something exciting and asking me to join in, not out on street asking me for \$5 a week. Whilst I understand that face to face monthly donor fundraising underpins the financial viability of many individual groups, I think it's impossible to overestimate the damage it has done to the overall brand of environmentalism, as people learn to avoid anyone who talks to them about saving whales or protecting the climate, and we position environmentalism as a charity that wants your money, not your voice or your power. This is a difficult situation, because obviously shutting down face to face fundraising overnight would bankrupt many NGOs doing good work — but surely there's a way we can at least change the model to do less harm?

Donating in many circumstances can be an empowering and political act — such as GetUp's ad campaign, funded by its members that contributed to the recent stunning victory of saving the Solar Flagships program. But monthly giving that starts with being harassed in the street is not an empowering experience for most people.

The Australian Youth Climate Coalition basically forced Prime Minister Julia Gillard to have a one on one meeting with us soon after she was elected Prime Minister, and it's not because we had young people in elephant suits follow her around during and after the election campaign, or because a Twitter and Facebook petition that swamped her online presence.

It's because the AYCC has a genuine, mainstream, mass grassroots presence on the ground across Australia in every state & territory. The AYCC built 57,000 members, and an enormous volunteer base of over 2000 young people in less than four years through a community

organising strategy focused on building support and power person-to-person, school-to-school, suburb-by-suburb. It's a combination of a "back to basics" organising model with cutting edge new media work and a cheeky, creative and fun approach.

2. My second suggestion flows on from this success — the movement as a whole must re-engage young people and young volunteers in ALL organisations

Despite youth being at the forefronts of all movements throughout history and around the world, from Egypt and Iran to US Presidential campaigns, most NGOs do no outreach work with young people to involve them in their campaigns. In fact, they prefer to focus on signing up middle aged women because they're more reliable donors. Yet we have so many amazing young people in this country who want to get involved – we have kids coming to us saying, "now that I know about climate change, what is the point of school?" and doing everything they can to solve it.

Secondly, many organisations don't even accept young people, especially under-18s as volunteers or interns because of the risk. Surely the bigger risk is that our movement will become old, stale, tired and worsen the leadership crisis that we currently facing. A strong and powerful environment movement must not abdicate all responsibility for involving young people to groups like the AYCC.

3. My third suggestion is around tools — we must use the tools we have more effectively

The world has changed, and if we're going to organise where people are spending their time, we must make better use of online organising. At first it was a struggle to get environmental organisations to use online campaigning. But now that most groups are using these tools, we have another problem: we've created a politics of gesture. People click on the link to "make their voice heard" but many times, their voice is not really being heard when the ask is too vague, or the organisation not equipped to properly translate the online voices into political power.

It's not enough to bring in the new tools, you also have to bring in the mindset behind the tools — to be able to

work quickly, nimbly, flexibly. The world simply moves faster than the pace at which most of the big environment organisations were set up to deal with, which means they can't operate properly in the online environment.

The second tool that the environment movement has failed to use effectively is advertising. Yes, it's expensive, but we live in a world where advertising shapes people's consciousness and their politics. If it's going to be effective, it needs to happen on a mass scale — that's one thing we can learn from the mining industry.

Environmental organisations say they don't have the money to run effective large-scale advertising campaigns — there is a mindset in many of the "big" groups that they are small. But they have enormous budgets and enormous reserves, spend too much on staff and marketing and don't have discretionary budgets left to support even effective small scale community organising like the climate action groups and their 100% renewables campaign, let alone audacious and ambitious things like a mass advertising campaign.

4. Move from communicating policy to communicating values and empathy

The environment movement must abandon our obsession with policy and realise we are instead dealing with culture wars. We need to stop talking so much about policy and instead appeal to core Australian values. This means stopping seeing climate change as an "environmental" issue. It's about people, it's about health, it's about future jobs and economic growth, and it's about the survival of our children.

As Alex Steffen says: "Most people do not want to destroy the biosphere or ruin their fellow human beings or impoverish their children. We have an incredibly important asset on our side: our position is the only sane one."

Yet somehow we have failed to communicate this in a way that resonates with people's values, because we've been stuck in a 1980s mindset that thinks we'll win through having better policy and access to policy makers.

Australia is becoming a much more conservative country, and anti-environmentalism is gaining traction due to successful right-wing framing like "great big new tax". The Howard era fundamentally changed our nation's psyche — it made Australians more fearful, less empathetic.

Yet as the legendary linguist George Lakoff reminds us constantly, empathy is the foundation of progressive politics, and we urgently need to build it back by focusing on values.

Conclusion

We know that for the majority of Australians, concern over climate change and sustainability is broad but shallow. But for a growing number of Australians, it's the most important issue to them, and it's led to them changing their mind, their lifestyles and their vote. For these people, the challenge is to do whatever they can to scale up those parts of our environment movement that are building and using power effectively.

Because ultimately my point is this: whether or not environmentalism continues to fail in Australia, whether or not we can solve climate change before it's too late, it's not just up to the professional staff of environment organisations, although I know they are all doing their best. Ultimately, it's up to ordinary people, because they are the assets that give our movement power.



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Anna works with Make Believe clients to devise effective campaign strategies. Anna co-founded and remains Chair of the Australian Youth Climate Coalition and is the 2009 Environment Minister's joint *Young Environmentalist of the Year*. Anna was previously GetUp's climate campaigner, coming up with creative online and community-based campaigns such as the national Climate Torch Relay

Previously, Anna worked with the National Union of Students and coordinated students at over 37 campuses to win campus-based clean energy victories. She co-authored the book *Future by Us* and is a regular opinion writer on climate and energy issues. Anna has spent significant time in the United States, including working on the Obama campaign.

She holds a 1st class honours degree in Arts (Asian Studies)/ Law from the University of Sydney, is a Fellow of the International Youth Foundation, is the recipient of the Sierra Club's 2010 EarthCare Award for contribution to international environmental protection and holds an Australian Leadership Award from Australian-Davos connection.

Anna was named one of Sydney's 100 Most Influential People by the Sydney Morning Herald in 2009 and is a 2010 Churchill Scholar.

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