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Tasmanian Wilderness Society
PROTEST AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

Last year I went to see the Editor of the Hobart "Mercury". He had written a stinging attack on conservation-movement protesters, portraying them as a minority who were anti-progress and unwilling to accept the due processes of democracy and the law.

He told me his paper's editorial line was to foster the interests of business. I had guessed as much and so, to help challenge this simplistic approach, had dressed up like a businessman myself. We had a good session. I pointed out that businessmen are an even smaller minority than conservationists.

As I got up to leave, I asked the editor if he would have written the same sort of diatribe against that bloke who, two thousand years ago in a bout of anger, demolished the businessmen's tables at the Temple, causing havoc and, no doubt, extensive damage. He looked shocked. After a period of silence he said, "I worry about that - I just don't know".

The fundamental fallacy in the argument of those who oppose protest in our time is that they will all point with admiration to the protest movements of history- Without protest, without minorities causing trouble, without illegal or illegitimate forays by women and men bucking the system, our world would be a worse place than it is. Slavery would abound. Universal education for children would be out: they would still be in the mine pits. Women would not have the vote. Workers would have no rights. There would be no parliaments. Indeed, there would be no argument at all. 120
For protest begins with a difference of opinion. It is the stuff of politics. It is the enlivener that governs the welfare of all communities which live between the extremes of divine rule and chaos.

Yet, in Australia, it has been given negative connotations. This is because it is anathema to those who have most power and say - to the same people who also have greatest influence, through the media, on public opinion. Protest is also seen in very limited terms. In the public mind, "protest" conveys the meaning of active confrontation, placards, rallies, lying in front of bulldozers. Of course, it is much more than that. It is a spectrum of action or inaction from refusing to vote to taking up arms.

To be used as a successful political weapon in Australia, direct action as protest is the last resort. We are a rich, extravagant, blinkered society. We have more material goods, comfort, and security than just about any people in recorded history. For all its shortcomings, Australia is also just about the most democratic, easygoing society on record. A corollary of all these wonders is that Australia is also deeply comfortable, conservative and determinedly shortsighted. Most people take this lucky country for granted. Yet they are also insecure and easily irritated by other citizens who threaten them with the reality of the rest of the world or the inescapable fact that Australia's future is tied in with that of the rest of the planet. Most Australians do not want to face reality 7. they do not want to be part of a global community beset with shocking problems and, worse, they do not want to live knowing
we will either survive or die with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, our privileged position puts special responsibility on Australians to be politically active, to protest, to fight that the world might avoid the worst and survive for a future worth living.

So protestors must understand that they are stirring the possum the minute they step off the kerbing- They have left neutral ground. They are making people insecure. They had better have a clearcut case which the populace can easily understand, relate to and want to support.

Successful protest has this in mind and will be the end of political process which prepares the populace to be on side.

Let me take the case of a conservation issue - nonviolent action or protest is the end of the line.

In many ways the first bit is the hard bit: to get enough people and therefore politicians on side so that the wild forest, landmark building or rare animal say, is protected by political decree. It is hard work. People have to be roused to help before the threat of destruction becomes reality. Before passions are aroused by the sight of trees or buildings being smashed, wildlife scattered, the countryside made ugly. A protest campaign will have some basic ingredients.

appeal to the public's sense of fairplay, its concern for beauty, and its abhorrence of unnecessary destruction.
Photographs, film, written description and, best of all, visits to the threatened area by people allows the beauty or history of the feature to speak for itself. This is the strongest part of a campaign. The opposition has no good reply. Certainly, the pictures of bulldozers or chainsaws do them no good and, at best, aggravate the sensitivity of most people.

2. A well researched economic and employment, as well as environmental, case. We are in an age when conventional god-'fearing religions have given way to materialism. It is essential to assure people that there are good alternatives to the proposed forestry invasion. That jobs need not be lost. That there are alternative management plans as good or better than that proposed. This means legitimate research and a real concern for those who stand to lose if you win.

3. A determination not to get caught in personal slander and mudslinging. The other side will do. It always occurs as soon as their case is found wanting. They will divert attention by calling the campaigners "ratbags", "layabouts", "radicals" and, off the record, much worse. It works for them but has to be up with put: To follow suit and return the abuse is to lose the campaigners' greatest strength: integrity, and constant sight of the issue being fought.

4. Respect for the populace-at-large. This means, above all, giving that populace every chance to weigh in and help. Public meetings, stalls, newsletter, information brochures, shops, car stickers, petitions and so on are essential. And, at this stage, the first elements of real protest are vital.
The well-organized street rally, cavalcade of cars to the forests, friendly but firm batch of placard-bearing people outside politician's offices or at the airport when the Prime Minister arrives.

5. Lobbying of politicians, newspaper editors, well-known citizens, church leaders, unions, business groups and so on. People need to be helped into this daunting, difficult process through classes run by those who have already been lobbyists.

6. All conventional avenues of getting the right decision need to be worked. Friendly, legal advice - it is usually the best if it is free - is imperative. The opponents and politicians alike need to know that court challenges are not the prerogative of the rich or privileged, even if the law is bent that way, and that you will take your case to court if needs be.

7. Keeping the media well informed. It should be plied with newsworthy information: easily digested reports, leaked documents, good pictures, interesting personalities (from old sawmillers to young T.V. stars).

8. The campaign must run on Openness. The campaigners must know each other and have the trust and concern that comes from being kept informed, feeling wanted, and getting understanding when they do something wrong or put their foot in it. The campaign style will vary but the structure will be a mix of the absolute consensus model and an heirarchy - neither extreme works.
9. No-one should be written off. Not the National Party, the Chamber of Commerce, the Spartacus League or Hell's Angels. One particularly bad mistake is to assume that the press is against you. Regardless of last week's editorial tirade, it is essential to make a routine of meeting editors. The same applies to party leaders and civic dignitaries if they know you they are compromised in their ability to pour vitriol on you, your friends and your cause.

10. And stay positive! As an old lady on the East Coast of Tasmania remarked: "The thing I like about your NO DAMS slogan is that it's so positive!"

Finally, if campaigns are to succeed they need to find a-warm spot in the hearts of middle Australia. The obvious barriers need to be torn down. Appearances are vital. Knowing this, the Wilderness Society has a camouflage cupboard with a long rack of assorted suits, ties, dresses and shoes. People going lobbying or facing a T.V. interview are able to doff their comfortable gear and don conventional-style straightjackets in a matter of minutes. It seems absurd, but it works. It is a small price to pay to help save a timeless wilderness, ancient landmark, or for that matter, kindergarten or refuge.

The earlier a campaign begins, the more chance of its success. And it is always good to assume that you will lose the next decision, and, so, to be ready for the following round, to be thinking at least one step ahead. When, in the Franklin campaign, we "lost" the rigged referendum in 1981, we were already preparing for a state election campaign. When we lost that - and that
was a devastating downer – we made our first High Court challenge' – within the month and lost that too. Only then, with the bulldozers rolling south to the Franklin damsite, did we resort to direct action. But direct action was a contingency which had been foreseen 2 years earlier and which had had monumental preparations over the preceding year.

Had the Franklin blockade come out of the blue, had it not been based upon 6 years of persistence, public relations and political pressure, it would have failed. Had it not had long, deliberate planning, good supply lines, a ban on alcohol, children and weapons, it would have failed.

And had it been seen as an end in itself, had we deceived ourselves to believe that we frail human beings could bodily stop the barges, excavators, D9 bulldozers and dement trucks rolling up the river valleys, it would have failed.

The blockade was part of the political process. It succeeded because a vital national election followed and the $10 million worth of free national media publicity the blockade engendered made the plight of the Franklin a winning election issue.

Let no-one doubt that there were those fighting for the Franklin who would have given their all for it. Yet this idealism was always tempered by a commonsense regard for Australians and their conservative outlook in most forms of political action. We had to reach them – they, and not just us, could save the river.
So the blockade was centred at friendly Strahan, a town with one public telephone. Months ahead, we bought a wharfside building, installed multiple phones, telex machines, electric typewriters and so on. To facilitate the media we organized for abalone divers to hire their speedboats, got a fishing boat moored up river as a communications centre, had a private plane fly daily to Hobart or Melbourne with film and supplies, and did our best to offer good information. Meanwhile, the Hydro-Electric Commission blocked access, arrested trespassers and treated the mainland press and public generally as pariahs. — As the H.E.C.'s chief, Mr Ashton, told ABC TV's Nationwide — "If governments take notice of the majority, we are doomed in this country and we are doomed everywhere."

It is not just the majority but also minorities which the authorities fear. In particular, they fear folk who will not abide by the laws which they, of course, set. They particularly worry about people who confront official violence using peaceful means — this is the achilles heel inside every jackboot.

It was made most clear to me at Risdon Jail. Friends refused permission to visit me, left me a copy of Thoreau's classic about nature "Walden Pond". But, much to the alarm of the jail superintendent, the book is subtitled "with an essay on civil disobedience". The book was banned. I could not read it. Yet on the same day, with no option allowed, and along with the other, long term inmates, we were made go to the prison cinema to see the unexpurgated bloodlust and mayhem of "Caligula"!
There are plenty of occasions where direct action must be applied early - when bulldozers suddenly start demolishing an old building, when nuclear ships enter port, when someone is dying because of government indifference.

Such hasty action can come ‘unstuck.’ Be wary of folk who see direct action as an only means or as an end in itself.

Logging of Victoria's beautiful Errinundra Plateau got the government go-ahead two years ago when, despite local conservationists' concern, a busload of Nomadic Action Group folk drove in, set up a blockade, and rightly or wrongly gave the Melbourne Herald headlines about naked dancers - around late night campfires. The logging industry responded with a well-organized, angry rally, the minister instantly caved in, the forests began falling and the protestors, in disarray, bussed out again, leaving the local campaigners to muse at how easily direct action can fail.

Having outlined the strategies of protest in Australia, I want to say a word about the morality of protest.

Henry Thoreau said words to the effect that when the law is wrong the only right place for a citizen to be is in jail. I agree with that sentiment.

What to go to jail for, is a more difficult question. Violence against people is to be abhorred. However, to refrain from adding sugar when a bulldozer is creating death and destruction to a living wilderness, is only sensible if some other political strategy will be compromised by such an act.
In Australia we are 'far too shy to act, to get off that street kerb, to step into the gutter where true principle is so often found.

Take a quick look at our planet. Each second an area of forest the size of a football field is chainsawed down. Every 3 hours another thermonuclear bomb is put on another rocket and aimed at people. Today, six thousand tonnes of insecticide will be sprayed onto Earth's natural fabric and two thousand people will be made ill or die as a result. 40,000 children will die of starvation by this time tomorrow. Meanwhile, at least one more species of wildlife will be driven to extinction. And, if it is an 'average day for the onslaught, 1,000 more boys or young men will die, in the name of Allah, at' the Iraq-Iran warfront.

How dare we do so little? How can we be so cold-hearted, so frightened for ourselves, so extravagant in the face of such need?

Or to look at it in another way, how dare we sell our lives so short as to not grasp our privileged position as individual Australians and 'get much more involved in the 'planets affairs? How dare we NOT be protestors. All that is needed for the world to disintegrate is for good people to do nothing-

I was in jail for 3 weeks during the Franklin blockade. It gave me some time to work out why I had felt so acutely embarrassed at being arrested amidst a great deal of publicity at the damsite. Then I thought again of those wretched but amazing human beings incarcerated or on the torture racks of Argentina, Iran or South Africa.
It was not necessary to know them, to have their names, to witness their fate as protestors. In fact, their haunting anonymity, kept our efforts in real proportion. They were the greatest inspiration. They made our efforts seem so effortless. They were crushed and bloodied, unsung and often obliterated forever. Yet still, though unbeknowns to them, they gave us great encouragement.

History moves because of protestors. The future is not safe and the political process would fail without them. In protest is the hope for the Earth.