

Department of Media & Communications lecture

## If We Really Want Change, We All Need to Be Activists

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Sixteen years ago I was a student here studying social psychology - back then I was interested in what makes people work together to achieve social change. I stood for local government and then parliament for the same reason - not for the meetings, but the ability to make a difference. To serve the community and country in which I live and the causes about which I'm passionate.

It seems odd to have to state that, but it's often the first question people ask- why do you do this? Sometimes when I'm sat in a meeting I would chew my own arm off to leave I ask myself the same thing.

I was elected in 2010 when following the expenses scandal 25% of the entire House of Commons stood down and 233 new MPs were elected. Six years on the jokes about expenses haven't stopped, and public opinion about MPs hasn't improved. But then it hasn't changed in thirty years.

Last year just 16% of Britons trusted politicians to tell the truth, compared with 22% trusting journalists and estate agents and 31% who trust bankers. Only 18% trusted us to tell the truth in 1983, and it reached a low point of only 13% trusting MP in 2009, in the wake of the expenses scandal. In contrast trust in bankers has bounced back from 2013, when only 21% trusted them to tell the truth to 31% saying they trust them now.

And your generation, those born in the late 1990s, really doesn't like us. Within what Noreena Heertz calls Generation K - after Katniss in the *Hunger Games* - only one in 10 of you trust governments to do the right thing. Which is down from only one in five from Generation Y. The relationship between the public and their traditional political institutions is not reviving - it's ruptured and possibly beyond repair. Declining turnout at elections has been a long standing trend - only 40% of the public now identify at all with a political party. Hansard Society research last year found most people (58%) think that the democratic system does not address the interests of themselves or their family very well or at all.

Whether Greenpeace, the Women's Institute or Citizens UK, mass movements are trying to circumvent the slow pace of change in traditional institutions. Increasingly change happens through the soft power of public relations and celebrity - whether Benedict Cumberbatch on refugee rights, Jamie Oliver on sugar taxes or Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall on fish.

Nearly as many people who take part in local elections use their shopping basket to express a view. According to the BSA, last year about 36% of people have deliberately boycotted or boycotted certain products. Yet for all of this, over a third of the population are estimated to be disengaged from all informal and formal politics.

But wait you say - its not true people are turning off, they are just turning away from the old style of politics and their elitist ways. The Europe debate and UKIP are ripping apart the conservative establishment. Momentum and Jeremy are shaking up the left. And that's popular. Since the General Election, the Labour Party has grown so large it now has more members than all of the other major political parties - new and old - combined. And the average age of a party member has fallen from 53 to 42 (the Tory average is 60).

Whether Podemos, Syriza, Donald Trump, Anonymous or even Jeremy Corbyn the public are kicking back against the establishment. As Katniss would say "if we burn, so do you".

And they are right to be angry. As things stand this generation not going to have the same opportunities as their parents unless the bank of mum and dad can bail them out. This is not about if you can afford a house. This is about whether you can afford to live at all.

China, Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia is pumping out graduates at a rate of knots. At the same time centenarian's are the fastest growing demographic in our country meaning you're going to have to deal with the cost of looking after your mum and dad as well as your own rent, and 35% of jobs will be replaced by computers within 20 years - though I've checked and you will be disappointed to hear that sadly politicians are not on the list...

Little wonder traditional political parties and traditional political leadership seems terrifyingly small in ambition and ability when faced with these challenges. So anger is justifiable - but it's also not enough. You can't leave your future to others to sort. You also need to do something about it. And to do that you need to have answers.

Having answers requires more than being 'anti austerity'. It needs ideas for what to do instead - and then deciding to use our resources to make that happen and not something else. And with each of the challenges we face - whether poverty, terrorism, global warming - the idea that 650 people in the place I call 'Hogwarts gone wrong' is enough to do that simply doesn't make sense. If you really want radical solutions you have to rethink political activism entirely.

To tackle climate change not only do you need international treaties and agreements about carbon - you need each individual and communities to work together to create a different lifestyle

all together. If you want to address social mobility we need not just great teachers, or brilliant school buildings, but also youth clubs and strong families. From the grassroots to the global. And if you want the decisions made to be fair to all then everyone has to have a voice and a role.

Straightforward? Well there's good reason why people shy away from tricky questions like 'well what could you do' and making decisions. Because finding answers - and making change happen - isn't easy. It's not as comfortable or simple as just being angry.

Changing the world is hard work especially if you want the public to be involved - whether in paying taxes or altering their own behaviour. You have to be willing to make a case for what you propose, not just with those who agree but those who are unconvinced. You may have to compromise - you may even have to admit you were wrong.

Given confronting the world as it is in order to make it the world it could be is such hard work, it's easy to see how and why politicians have found ways to divert your anger rather than engage with it.

Consider the parliamentary e-petitions system - if a 100,000 people sign a petition we have to have a debate in parliament. Since introduced in 2010 have had 303 of them. In last year alone topics have ranged from membership of the EU to extradition, to financial education, cycling and metal theft.

I asked the House of Commons library whether any of these has then become law, but as these debates don't actually make laws only small number have actually led to any change - standardised packing of tobacco, the future of pubs and wild animals in circuses. And to be fair, after another debate there's no sign Donald Trump coming to the UK anytime soon.

Its not just traditional forms of engagement that are pulling their punches. As an MP I am spammed regularly, as organisations old and new send me emails or tweets about their campaigns - what people call clicktivism.

Around 2.5 million people are members of 38 Degrees - since they were set up they have had over 6,000 campaigns of which they claim 166 are successful, including on forests and the NHS. That means for all those emails you've been asked to send you have a campaign success rate of 2.6%. Change.org has an even bigger social footprint with eight million members in the UK. In March last year Guido Fawkes started a petition to reinstate Jeremy Clarkson co-host of *Top Gear* which gained over 1,000,000 signatures in 10 days. So too, their petition for Iain Duncan Smith to live on £53 a week hit 300,000 signatures in three days. Neither requests have happened to date - but we did get women on bank notes.

As political institutions struggle, the power of bad headlines, or celebrity coverage is becoming the norm for political activism - with resulting limited effect. This stands in stark contrast to the history of protest - to the civil rights movement, to even the poll tax protests which I attended as an 11-year-old.

Now you might argue that rupture between the public and their politicians is because 'the elite' ignores popular movements - because in a capitalist society only money speaks and protests are the voice of the poor and dispossessed. That's why we need to elect one to office. Which worked out so well in Spain. And Greece.

Or you might argue that my analysis is a caricature. That these forms of political activism may not be a direct mechanism for change but they are more than a talking shop. They are creating an environment where change can happen. Fifteen years ago the Jubilee 2000 drop the debt campaign took to the streets to create the public space for the 'elite' to make better, more radical decisions on international development spending. But Jubilee 2000 increasingly now the exception that proves the rule - creating a hunger for political engagement in a way others have shrunk it.

Or you may think 17million voters live in safe seats and 85% of seats do not shift when it comes to a general election. Change the voting system and you change where the power lies - as a campaigner for electoral reform myself would love to believe that's true, but sadly the evidence says otherwise.

All three points may have merit, but they miss the point. Any form of activism which doesn't have a suggested solution attached to it or resources to make it happen is little more than a displacement activity. And that's the same whether you are in office or in opposition.

Bluntly, you can have all the EDMs you want - they don't change a thing. They are at best parliamentary graffiti. Protest marches too may make you feel good, but put down the placard and ask where the power lies and how you can access it if you really want to make a difference. Ask me and my colleagues not to respond to your anger, but help you channel and fund it into outcomes.

I am not pessimistic about the possibility of change, quite the reverse, but I am focused on what actually makes it happen. Nor am I dismissing of any organization or campaigning tool - all can be effective in their own way IF they tap into power and apply it to an actual idea. And I'm determined to do all I can to get a Labour Government. But I know none of these things alone is enough to really change the world.

Because the problem here isn't the mechanisms but the mindset. It is the rise of the righteous bystander. My own grandfather used to say that if I disagreed with him, he could only beg me to think further. Righteous bystanding can take many forms - petitions, protests, boycotts, hashtags, meetings. It has at its heart talking about doing something over actually doing something. It means you can retain a purity in your intentions - and so be immune from criticism or scrutiny - by avoiding the messy reality that comes with being responsible for making your ideas happen.

In my own party this best expresses itself in the obsession with resolutions about 'positions' that are often debated at length in meetings. In 20 years of attending these events I've yet to see such a single resolution become more than a dinner party debate.

If we are honest, being righteous without having to be responsible is great fun. You can criticise someone else's decisions - currently 'the government' but sometimes those in your own party - whilst never having to think about why people disagree with you. And as bystanders it doesn't matter if others don't support you - because you weren't going to seek their involvement in doing anything in the first place.

As an elected official it means I can happily agree with you, knowing I'll never have to do anything about it - except perhaps a photo opportunity or badge. A righteous bystander never asks 'now what' when the motion is passed or the photo taken. Its job done.

It's also explains how we end up blaming the electorate for not voting for us, rather than asking why or what would make them work with us in the fight for social justice. As righteous bystanders we can spend our time sitting in our meetings or online where everyone we talk to, everyone we know, agrees with us. These echo chambers confirm our worldview- and eventually that others will see the light.

Which brings me back to that increase in membership of Labour - and Momentum. As a candidate in the Deputy Leadership contest I spent last summer travelling country meeting those who joined. They wanted something more - not to be part of old style politics, not simply cogs in a machine being asked to deliver leaflets, but really changing things.

But six months on its becoming clear this interest is not translating into engagement. It's not just the curdled political debate of 'Red Tory' and 'Corbynista' that make it hard for people to go to meetings with each other or talk on Facebook. It's that even when people aren't shouting at each other, they aren't being encouraged to take action either. Groups like Momentum now appear to be draining the very energy from our political process they claimed to be promoting, by encouraging the myth righteous by-standing IS activism.

In the last six months I've seen little evidence of campaigning 'for' something. I have seen a lot of meetings and moralising - and a lot of people standing for positions to be able to divert people into more meetings and moralising to complete the cycle. It's taking the Oscar Wilde argument 'that the problem with socialism is it takes too many evenings' to the extreme - as though having meetings with ourselves and passing resolutions is the revolution we seek.

More than that, the emphasis by some in these groups on controlling the levers of power to select - or deselect - MPs and party officials may make sense in a world where elites are effective at making change happen, but in modernity where securing social justice requires everyone to be involved it is short-sighted. Not only is it divisive, it reinforces the idea only a small group of

people can actually make a difference - and relegates the power of the rest of us just to picking them. It doesn't challenge elitism, it strengthens it.

You may say let them have all the meetings they want - you don't have to go. But all the time we don't confront such models of what political involvement entails, we let it dominate what it means to be part of the Labour movement. And we will waste the hunger for progressive change that exists by letting it disintegrate into grievances, not activism.

This is not about left or right. Or being 'principled' vs 'electable'. It's not even about everyone agreeing with each other - constructive debate is how we find better answers and that requires the grit of difference. Even in increased numbers, party members are an elite themselves - a group small in number who don't reflect society as a whole. So all of us - Momentum included - have a responsibility to recognise that and respect it by ensuring we are open to the views and voices of those who may share our ambitions but not our membership cards. This is instead a call for us all to ensure we don't waste our time being bystanders as the world becomes more unfair.

Because when we do ask each other to come up with answers, to make some decisions and the implement them - that's when change happens. Our predecessors didn't just want to end health inequality, they won the argument for and built an NHS. In 1997 Labour didn't just say child poverty should end, we brought in a minimum wage and Surestart. When we took on legal loan sharking we weren't just angry at the interest rates offered by payday lenders. We had an answer - a cap on the cost of credit - and we asked people across the country to help make the case for this in their communities. Crucially it also shows why we seek power - why we fight elections - because it highlights how much quicker we can put into practice the ideas we have.

The people who were so inspired to join Labour last summer and who are now walking away, or not turning up at the meetings - or even those who sit them out - need us to do more than stand up to those drowning them in resolutions or rants about revolutionary socialism. They need us to offer a genuine and radical political movement. And that includes being brave enough to go back to the drawing board entirely.

No longer should we defend processes which support the idea of a small elite who come up with all the ideas and allocates resources accordingly, whilst the public is relegated to bystanding - or grandstanding in some cases - about the outcomes. Time spent trying to reform the current system is time missed out on recognising the need to build from the ground up a completely different type of politics all together.

Our politics is based on idea that recognises individually we can only make limited choices - no matter how wealthy we are - but collectively we can change what's on offer for all of us. But it also sees whatever the answer is we have, none of us can do this on our own. And if you ask me to try to do so - to be the elite - whilst you as a bystander tell me I'm doing it wrong, then we will both fail.

So if you really want change, if you really want the odds to be in your favour, we all need to be activists.

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