

Environmental Advocacy In Canada

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Environmentalism has developed considerably in the last 100 years. This can be seen in the increasing ecological awareness of the peoples of the world, the variety of issues, the important public policy changes and the incorporation of a great many new participants in the movement. Change is also visible in the broad gamut of activities that range from attempts to foster rational use of natural resources to the prevention of contamination, the minimization of waste and the inclusion of third generation environmental issues like acid rain, global warming and desertification. Evolving forms of participation have also accompanied and promoted these changes: the late nineteenth century's elitist style has given way to democratic, participatory forms in the current decade. As a result, the debates on environmental questions in the 1980s and 1990s have gone from a list of simple discussion topics to the creation of an agenda for developing, implementing and evaluating public policies locally, nationally, regionally and globally. During this period, the focus on ecological issues has shifted from a scientific approach to an ethical concern.

Although it existed from the beginning of the century, awareness about the

quality of the environment in Canada has reached significant proportions since World War II, particularly between the 1960s and the 1980s, giving rise to new social movements. The impact of these movements has reoriented society's perceptions, attitudes and behavior. They have sought to define their strategies in

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the sphere of power, acting in general outside political institutions and the established party system. Civil society has overwhelmed the state in moments of crisis and shown its ability to creatively mobilize and effectively self-organize in emergencies. Environmentalists think that new orientations for the future are needed in the entire governmental machinery,

orientations which transcend short-term decisions framed in electoral cycles.

In the broad sense, environmental groups are organizations for social advocacy. They share characteristics with other organizations like those of the women's, human rights, peace and ethnic movements. In this article, social advocacy is defined as a positive, pro-active form of protest carried out by a particular group or social network. Social advocacy challenges dominant values and beliefs by means of protest. It provides itself with new scientific and cultural knowledge that promotes varying forms of political commitment. Advocacy is a greater communicative process in modern democracies, making it possible for alternative forms of knowledge to contribute to the construction of society. Environmental groups are extra-parliamentarian, but non-violent; they combine activities to create awareness and gain political strength in order to question legislatures in the name of the public good.

The Canadian environmentalist movement is very diverse. Its approximately 2,000 groups range from large, self-financed organizations with million-dollar budgets to small local groups with concrete causes. About 400 of them are located in the province of Ontario, including most of those with economic resources and public recognition like Greenpeace, World

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The action strategies used by these groups are mainly based on "coopted advocacy." This means that the membership of most advocate organizations is too small for them to be autonomous and therefore they must depend directly on government financing. Others obtain financial support from consulting contracts with the government. Even in these cases, such as the Pollution Probe, they cannot be sure of a steady annual income, particularly in times of economic recession. In such a context, advocate groups often dedicate most of their time fighting recurring financial crises. Greenpeace is an exception; after the lean years in the early 1980s, it now manages to support itself completely by member donations.

All environmental advocate groups, including Greenpeace, suffer from high staff turnover. Greenpeace has controlled this by separating its executive council from its day-to-day committees for fund raising, telephone outreach and local action. But other advocate organizations' resources are too scarce to adopt this solution. Its executives are responsible for all aspects of mobilization and constantly have to choose between different activities: research or fund raising, public education through publications or political opposition, organization of community activities or networking with other environmentalist organizations. The eternal problem is being on top of the main demands of organizational survival to maintain their position as effective lobbyists. Scarcity of funds, over-commitment and the aspiration for better salaries and working conditions are a powerful combination spurring constant staff turnover. As

might be expected, this situation tends to reduce all the advocacy organizations to key actors. Between 25 and 50 social actors keep the "coopted" organizations together.

Environmental advocacy in Canada mainly takes the form of political lobbying and media and legal work. The first and most important is legal advocacy that takes cases through the courts or environmental reviews. This is necessary because common taxpayers cannot follow a case against big corporations and because individual action against air pollution and other environmental questions is still not allowed. For example, the Canadian Environmental Law Association estab-

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lished the Environmental Defense Fund which helps grassroots organizations overcome the disadvantages of their size to be able to deal with local cases before the courts. Its aim is to create legal precedents in environmental review criteria to contribute to establishing future strict accountability about environmental sustainability in Canada.

The second main activity is political lobbying of provincial, federal and international agencies. Responsibility for environmental policy is divided between the federal and provincial governments. This divided jurisdiction is complicated by the disputes among the ministries and departments in Ottawa that actively resist any possibility that Canada's Ministry of the Environment become a super-ministry capable of monitoring government policies' compatibility. The National Round Table on Environment and the Economy, and the provincial round tables were established in 1988 to allow Canada to fulfill its commitment to the Brundtland Report prepared for the United Nations.¹ The round table is based on the principle of association for sustainable development, which means a tri-partite decision making process involving environmentalist groups, governments and corporations. However, the government adoption of sustainable development and the principle of association have been two-edged swords for environmental advocacy. The environmentalists consider the round table deliberations extremely slow, to the point that they often say their participation is only rhetorical.²

This is why Canadian environmental groups often operate in opposition to government policies instead of associating themselves with them. Clearly the strategy of coopted advocacy that makes them depend on government financing is not translated into unconditional political support. Canadian environmental movements generally have no difficulty in deciding on an opposition tenet. They do, however, find it difficult to present a unified platform. This is due in part to the fact that its members, mainly from middle

class backgrounds, have different political viewpoints, ranging from social democratic, Marxist and anarchist to center right. Their most common opponents are the neoconservatives who identify on a national level with the Conservative Party and their “support councils” associated with business interests; the Reform Party; the Nationalist Citizen Coalition, a group of populist businessmen; and a broad variety of think tanks like the C.D. Howe Institute.

The third form of advocacy is channeled through the media. David Suzuki has been the most widely known intellectual of the environmentalist movement because of his influence through newspapers columns and television. He has been a peace activist and a leader of ecologist thinking. His television series *The Nature of Things* has supported cases of indigenous groups and opposed projects like the James Bay Two hydroelectric plant. Suzuki’s protagonism has involved the change from cognoscitive to symbolic practice as the predominant form of knowledge in Ontario. His appearances in the media (especially television) are crucial because they span Canada’s political space and make an important contribution to the holistic formation of the environmentalist movement.

Similarly, almost from its founding, Greenpeace has organized symbolic activities, linking the media to its organizational objectives. Its main aim has been to testify to a series of unsustainable situations, pointing to them in the most dramatic way possible to make otherwise hidden effects of ecological degradation visible. Recently, Greenpeace has gone from real eco-dramas to the simulation of eco-dramas, which is why its members

have stopped making incursions against armed ships and begun scaling towers and bridges to hang protest signs. The new strategy is very effective because it presents complex environmental issues very strikingly. Environmentalists have learned from Greenpeace’s successes in this field.

Parallel to these three forms of advocacy, we can identify three main political orientations among members of environmentalist organizations: conservationist, radical and indigenous (First Nations) activist. The first is characteristic mainly of pragmatic reformists: the Canada Environmental Network, the World Wildlife Fund Canada (WWFC) and the Conservation Council of Ontario are exam-

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ples. The WWFC’s number of full time staff and level of professionalism means it can be compared with a successful business. It has a clear sense of power, of the status quo, which is why it is willing to be lenient with companies if that leads to positive action on environmental issues.³

Sometimes the tensions of red tape, government inactivity and industry’s prag-

matic cover-ups affect environmentalist groups’ organization. The most notable case was the Pollution Probe, whose director, Collin Isaacs, decided to support the green consumption campaign launched by Loblaws, an important supermarket chain. Pollution Probe members demanded his resignation, after which they reorganized and totally reoriented. Even though it still continues to do research as part of its political function, the Pollution Probe now pays more attention to information dissemination to the public.

The Conservation Council of Ontario is an umbrella organization that includes 31 groups dedicated to environmental planning. In contrast with other pragmatic reformist groups, it has very little contact with, and even less interest in, ordinary citizens. Council members are basically representatives of the status quo who seek to reduce the influence of grassroots environmentalist groups, making proposals to the centralized decision making process through cabinet ministers.

Canadian universities are an important source of intellectual resources for the movements. They play a more prominent role in public policy research and social advocacy than in the United States, where environmentalist group activities are supported by professional lobbyists. The Canadian university supports some advocate organizations like Pollution Probe, Probe International and the Coalition Against Acid Rain. Its links to the grassroots environmentalist movement have been weak given that the system of donations for environmental action favors the association between universities and corporations.

Greenpeace Canada represents the radical position. It is radical in the sense that

it is constantly challenging the existing relationship between government and businesses, asking that the government recognize the need for public involvement. The demand for public involvement is common to radicals and conservationists and is expressed through the Canadian Environmental Network.⁴ The radicals demand that the government commit itself to 1) public support for environmental groups; 2) establishing committees to supervise the impact of existing public policies and environmental agreements; and 3) keeping an eye on individual companies or cabinet ministers who refuse to act in accordance with environment-related decisions.

For a time, Greenpeace was divided between radical advocacy and militant activism. In 1993, one of its founders, Paul Watson, together with animal rights organizations organized a campaign to ban sailing in Newfoundland's coastal waters.⁵ Despite the campaign's being a success for Greenpeace in the European Community, it was a disaster in Canada and led to Watson's resignation a few months later. He later founded the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society which, among other things, vehemently opposed vivisection. Later, Watson moved to the United States where he organized Earth First!, a political action group that has assumed responsibility for several acts of ecological sabotage, carried out in the name of ecological advocacy.⁶

Lastly, the indigenous activist orientation links environmental movements with First Nations' territorial demands. This is a special trait of the environmentalist movement in Canada. In British Columbia and Quebec, for example, the relationship between the two has made for

some successes. In the case of the South Moreby dispute in British Columbia, relations between the logging industry and the provincial government broke irretrievably in May 1990.

In Ontario, joint action is shaky and generally poor given partly to the First Nations' lack of a unified environmentalist policy and partly to personality and cultural aspirations clashes between environmentalists and indigenous leaders. This was clear in the Temagami Wilderness Society (TWS) protest when Chief Gary Potts of Tema-Awaugame organized two independent blockades. His argument for acting this way was that TWS had only been concerned with protecting Crown



land trees, while his group wanted to protect all their natural resources.

These three political orientations are a challenge to coexistence in the Canadian environmental spectrum. Some of the tactics of the more radical group are disliked by the conservationist groups and vice versa. Nevertheless, they increasingly realize that both have contributions

to make to environmentalist aims. For example, radical groups like Greenpeace and Earth First! and activist organizations like Friends of the Earth and Energy Probe are considered necessary because they make harsh criticisms of governments and industries that have not complied with environmental programs. Similarly, environmentalist groups like Pollution Probe and the Institute for Research and Public Policy are considered necessary because they participate in discussion fora and question the Ministry of the Environment and the other ministers. The concern for clean urban communities, natural reserves and green areas reflect sentiments shared by conservationist, environmentalist and ecologist groups. Even initiatives linking economic and environmental issues have won broad approval throughout the entire spectrum of the movement.

Within the environmentalist movement, tendencies toward greater convergence are countered by a realistic understanding of the forces that cause conflict. There are, for example, differences of opinion in the environmentalist community about specific actions or strategies around two issues.⁷ The first is collaboration with corporations: access to business funds helps level the groups' financial playing field, but at the same time generates the constant threat and fear of cooptation. The most often noted case is the Loblaws-Pollution Probe, as was already mentioned. The second is the debate around reform or social change. The environmentalist movement is multi-class because class divisions accentuated by segregation and marginalization and induced by processes of environmental degradation have not been erased.

The great variety of demands and the expression of different social groups' particular interests make the constitution of a civil society movement in solidarity with the environmental cause difficult.

Canada's environmentalist movement has clearly shown that it is not monolithic, either ideologically or organizationally. A surprising thing about it is that serious environmentalists may be found along the entire political spectrum, from left to right. Putting to one side discordant political orientations, different environmental advocate groups have avoided competing for resources and created a network that links the larger groups to the smallest ones with more limited agendas. These local movements are close to a series of universal values (life, peace, equality, justice, freedom, autonomy and human dig-

nity) that tie their particular demands to general consensuses through symbolic effectiveness and the potential that shared moral values have for bringing people together. Relations among environmentalist groups shift constantly. Through social advocacy, they enter into processes of growing cooperation and conflict at the same time that they make an effort to attain financial stability and organizational maturity. This is, in turn, a reflection of the movement's rapid, dynamic growth in the last decade. **MM**

NOTES

¹ The Brundtland Report or *Our Common Future*, prepared by Gro H. Brundtland for the U.N. World Commission on Environment and Development (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

² In many cases, the activists have been burned out by the delays and the dearth of answers from the government ministries.

³ It is public knowledge that some of Canada's biggest polluters give the WWFC-founded Wildlife Toxicology Fund important donations.

⁴ The Canadian Environmental Network has protested because Canadian governments consult behind closed doors with the big interests before making any important decisions. In theory, Canadians live in a democracy, but in practice, like in most democracies, the concentration of economic and political power limits the public's ability to participate in its own government, including the protection of the environment.

⁵ Off Newfoundland's coast is one of the world's largest and best fishing areas, the basis for the family industries of its inhabitants, predominantly indigenous people, particularly Inuits.

⁶ Earth First! operates basically in the United States and British Columbia, but has some support in Ontario universities.

⁷ For example, no agreement was reached about whether environmentalist groups should have refused to participate in negotiations about climatic change with the federal government in the early 1990s.

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