

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BALLOT BOX:

How People Power Can Stop Harper's Agenda and Create Fundamental Change

by Brigette DePape for the Council of Canadians
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About the Author

Delivering water to Senators as a Parliamentary Page is just one of the many jobs Brigette DePape has had. She has also cleaned up garbage from the Seine River, coordinated a children's camp in Bosnia, worked with migrant families in Winnipeg's inner city, and interned with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. She has an honours degree from the University of Ottawa in International Development and Globalization and her interest in international solidarity will take her to the UN climate negotiations in Durban, South Africa as part of the Canadian Youth Delegation. She's written three plays, spins two fire balls (called poi in Maori), and has one bookshelf overflowing with poetry. She is currently planning another direct action targeting Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

INTRODUCTION

My experience discovering the power of direct action has been exhilarating. It has filled me with hope about our collective ability to transform this country for the better.

Many now know me as the Page who held up a stop sign against Prime Minister Stephen Harper. But when I first moved to Ottawa to attend university, my aspirations were very different. I had no thoughts about turning Parliament into a site of protest. Instead, I wanted to take a comfortable place at its centre.

When I left my hometown of Winnipeg for Canada's capital, I came in part to join the Parliamentary Page Program. Back then, I saw Parliament as a means of bringing about much-needed social and political change. But living in Ottawa and working on the Hill, I began to understand our parliamentary system very differently. Far from serving to remedy injustice, it often seemed only to perpetuate it.

I was working as a Page in the Senate when Harper secured his majority government with only 39.6 of the popular vote. It had been difficult for me to watch the Conservative agenda move forward in a majority Conservative Senate. With a majority in the House of Commons as well, I knew it was about to get much worse. How could I continue to sit idly by as Harper pushed through a destructive agenda? I could no longer stay silent, so during the Speech from the Throne, I held up a bright red sign that read "Stop Harper."

I am moved by the thousands of people who were excited by my action. It shows that people in Canada are burning for change.

Harper will not be stopped within Parliament. With a Conservative majority in the House and in the Senate, he is free to implement the most damaging parts of his renegade program. For the next four years, we can expect corporate tax cuts, cuts to public services and pensions, erosion of public health care, free trade agreements that undermine democracy and labour standards, environmental degradation, and the expansion of the military and prisons. Even if all members of the opposition vote against Conservative policies, the policies will still pass.

I have come to realize that the only way to stop Harper is through grassroots activism. I have always been active in my community, but it was not until recently, and especially since my action in the Senate, that I have begun to discover the power of social movements and direct action.

Some people asked me if my being fired from my Senate job left me worried about my future. Actually, I have never been more hopeful. Working on the Hill, I felt trapped in an agenda and a system that I did not believe in. But as human rights activist and songwriter Joan Baez said, "Action is the antidote for despair." Now, working with social movements, I am more optimistic than ever about tomorrow. While the Conservative government tries to make a mess of our country, social movements are working tirelessly to stop it. They are the hope for real change in Canada.

Since my action, I have been excited to deepen my understanding of direct action: what it is, its source of power, and how historically it has led to positive change in Canada and around the world.

In this paper I write about discovering what people power is and the power of direct action; about how our power as citizens extends beyond voting to dissenting, which should be viewed as both a right and

responsibility. I will explore direct action in the current Canadian context and how people power can stop Harper. I look at how Harper's agenda is part of broader systemic problems. I explore the rich tradition of direct action in Canada from which our movement can build on and how intergenerational solidarity can be an important part of this. I look at the effects of taking action and the incredible impact it can have on each of us. I conclude with my thoughts about Canada's future and the power a broad-based people's movement could have.

PEOPLE POWER IS GREATER THAN THE POWER OF ANY GOVERNMENT

In our culture, we are misled to believe that power lies in the hands of wealthy politicians and their corporate allies. For example, the Prime Minister and the Queen give orders to the Usher of the Black Rod (my former boss) who gives orders to the Chief Page, who gives orders to the Deputy Chief Page, who gives order to the Senate Page (formerly me). We are led to believe that power flows only from the top-down. From this perspective, workers obey those in higher positions or else we face sanctions: for me that meant getting fired.

Now I am learning that this isn't the only way power operates. I have discovered that there are different ways of understanding power. In contrast to Parliament and most institutions in Canada that operate from the top-down, people power rises from the bottom-up.

Power from the bottom-up

Our culture tells us that politicians, military officials, and business executives are the only ones with power. We are taught to believe that some people have power while most people don't and that is simply how it is and always will be. We are socialized to think that these power relations are like the marble stone of the Parliament building – solid, durable and unchanging. But actually, these power relations are malleable; they are fluid like Canada's Great Lakes. By recognizing this fluidity, we can see the power that people have. These relations can be changed when people acknowledge their own power and join with others to build a movement.

Despite the popular misconception that institutions such as Parliament have more power than citizens, people are much more powerful when they choose to use people power.

While social movements do not have the same access to money or resources that governments do, what we do have is the power that comes when people act and speak together.

What is people power?

People power, also known as *satyagraha* by Gandhi (meaning soul force), street heat, and non-violent direct action, is power derived from uniting people to make change using tactics outside of regular institutions, such as courts or elections. In non-violent action, people make a commitment not to use physical force to do something that is unexpected or prohibited. Simply asking the government to do the right thing doesn't work often enough. So rather than give up, citizens and grassroots activists use people power to achieve a concrete goal.

The "consent theory of power," made known by Gene Sharp, a former U.S. political science professor who has written extensively about using non-violent tactics to change political policy, explains how power structures are naturally unsteady. They are supported by social institutions, such as the Conservative government, that are controlled by rulers with the assumed consent of those who are governed. When those who are being ruled remove their consent by refusing to obey, the controllers become powerless, and power shifts to those who were formerly with less.

The following quote from a group that helped to successfully oust Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević through a non-violent movement aptly explains people power:

“By themselves, rulers cannot collect taxes, enforce repressive laws and regulations, keep trains running on time, prepare national budgets, direct traffic, manage ports, print money, repair roads, keep food supplied to the markets, make steel, build rockets, train the police and the army, issue postage stamps or even milk a cow. People provide the services to the ruler through a variety of organizations and institutions. If the people stop providing these skills, the ruler cannot rule.”

- *Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies*

People power leads positive change

In school, I was told that Parliament was the way to make progress. Wanting to make change, I sought out the opportunity to become a Page to learn about the federal legislative process. But I have since realized that it is people power, not parliaments, that leads advancements in human rights and dignity. The most immediate victories that come to mind are Gandhi’s peaceful war against British Occupation, and the civil rights movement in the United States against racism, but there are thousands more examples.

Non-violent direct action is a key part of people power. Non-violent direct action can take the form of blockades, sit-ins, citizen’s arrests, and more, and often involves breaking rules or laws. But it cannot be done in isolation. I am beginning to see that while direct action is one of the most exciting parts of activism and its most public face, it can only be effective when a series of other elements come into the mix. These other elements include consciousness raising, community building, message framing, and media intervention, among other things.

Direct action has led to positive change, and more of it is needed to continue the unfinished work of past movements. Despite the tangible gains of civil rights movements in terms of securing the right to vote, banning discrimination in employment practices, ending public accommodations based on ethnicity, and creating affirmative action, racism and inequality persist. Despite the brave struggles of Indigenous peoples, the government continues to disrespect Indigenous sovereignty and rights, such as Indigenous peoples’ right to free prior and informed consent over development. Despite a strong labour movement in Canada, collective bargaining rights continue to be attacked and workers still face unjust conditions, especially those who are marginalized including women, immigrants, refugees, Indigenous peoples, and people of colour. These examples show that while direct actions have made a difference, more grassroots work must be carried out to achieve the fundamental social and political changes that are urgently needed.

DEMOCRACY IS MORE THAN JUST A BALLOT BOX

Democracy is not just about voting every four years. We have been deceived to think that our responsibility to our communities ends at casting a ballot. The notion that democracy is limited to choosing a member of Parliament who will then make decisions for us is preposterous when you think about it. Imagine if this was the case in your personal life: every four years you cast a ballot for the person who would make key decisions about your life including where you will live, whether you will have children, who your partner is, etc. Would you trust them to know what was best for you and just let them make all the decisions? Of course not. We would not leave these important decisions to someone else, and we cannot leave the decisions about our country to politicians. We need to be active and engaged every day: asking questions, reacting and taking action. By taking to the streets, we become agents of democracy, rather than the subjects of a flawed system. We become a living, breathing force for change.

While working in a Conservative-dominated Senate, I watched as politicians passed Harper's dangerous agenda. I watched when Senators rejected Bill C-311, the Climate Change Accountability Act and our one hope for at least some action on climate change. I watched when Senators passed tough-on-crime legislation that puts the most marginalized people in our communities behind bars. I saw firsthand that it is crucial not to leave decisions up to politicians when the values of those in power do not reflect our own. Now, with a Conservative majority in both the House and the Senate it is clearer than ever that the opposition parties alone can't stop Harper's agenda. Social movements have a crucial role to play. With limited checks and balances within Parliament, it is up to us to hold the Harper government accountable.

Grassroots organizing is key to creating and building the values of the majority, to open up discourse for real solutions, and making space for more progressive agendas.

Beyond "Hill hugging"

When I first came to Ottawa, I knew that I wanted to make change, but I had the wrong idea of how that would happen. We are taught that it is through Parliament that we can affect change. Believing this, I acted on the premise that you have to "wear the suit to change the suit;" that you have to work for the system to change the system. I became a Page because, in my mind, I saw it as a stepping-stone to being a government official, a politician, or a lobbyist – to wearing the suit and then changing it. But I realized that I was acting on false premises. System change is not made possible by working for the system, but by working with other organizers to challenge it.

Many people continue to work for the government with the hope that the government will improve. This is a false reassurance. We can hope that there will be a better government in four years, but history suggests it will only be incrementally better unless we see a significant turn-around in the way government operates. Government officials are spokespeople for the government's agenda and politicians, who often vote on party lines and whose agenda is largely determined by the goal of getting elected, are limited in what they can achieve. It is certainly not by working our way up in the government that we can expect this kind of change. Rather, this would require a major shift in public consciousness that we can only bring about by working with social movements.

I was wrong, too, to think that societal advancements would be achieved if I just learned how to lobby politicians better. I have begun to use the term “Hill-hugging” to describe the over-reliance on Parliament for affecting change. I realize now that writing letters to our MPs is not enough. Real change will be made not only by lobbying, but by the tireless work of activists and grassroots community groups to raise public consciousness around issues, to propose alternatives, and to embody the alternatives ourselves when the government refuses to listen.

Taking back decision-making power

Ensuring that democracy flourishes in Canada requires the meaningful engagement of people every day. Consider the destructive extractive industry projects spearheaded by the government and corporations that have been postponed or stopped because of the Indigenous peoples rose up against them by using direct action. The blockades at Grassy Narrows, where Indigenous peoples used roving blockades to stop logging corporations from pillaging their lands are one of a long list of examples. These actions are essential parts of larger campaigns and movements that have had other positive long-term effects. It is thanks to Indigenous struggles that we have many of the environmental regulations that we rely on to protect our land, air and water today – from Supreme Court precedents to international legal instruments.¹

Lessons from Bolivia

I had the privilege of traveling to Bolivia where I was inspired to see direct action for democracy in the streets. After years of neo-liberal leaders, people in Bolivia refused to continue to accept the privatization of essential services, such as water, at the behest of for-profit interests. In an incredible moment in world history, thousands of people in Bolivia took to the streets to stop the privatization of their water by transnational corporate water giant Bechtel. This exercise of people power trumped the power of the neo-liberal regime and the Bolivian government had no choice but to return water to public hands. The capacity of the social movement that was built through the fight against water privatization continued in future landmark battles, including the fight against the privatization of the gas sector.²

I am inspired by the words of Oscar Olivera, a leader of the water war, whom I had the great pleasure of meeting when I was in Cochabamba:

“...democracy is, above all, about who decides. And since April 2000, the Bolivian people began to say that it is the people who decide. We not only recovered our water, we recovered our voice.”³

1 Climate Justice Montreal, 10 Indigenous Struggles Canadian Climate and Environmental Activists should Support

2 Suzanne York, Bolivia’s Indigenous Revolution, Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples’ Resistance to Globalization.

3 Oscar Olivera, Oscar Olivera: After the Water War, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/latin-america-rising/oscar-olivera-after-the-water-war>

DISSENT IS BOTH A RIGHT AND A RESPONSIBILITY

It is our right to dissent

It was inspiring to be in the streets of Toronto during the G20 summit, surrounded by tens of thousands of people exercising their right to protest. Harper, who spent billions on security for the G8 and G20 meetings, tried to undermine our civil liberties and our right to dissent in an attempt to thwart our ability to challenge global neo-liberal policies. Hundreds of arrests – the most in Canadian peace time history – jailed and silenced dissident voices. With most of these charges dismissed or withdrawn, one can't help but wonder: where is the accountability? Who will answer for the decision to use police force and confinement against Canadians who were only doing what they are legally allowed to do?

To be honest, I have taken our right to protest for granted. But now I see that it is because of the ongoing struggle of activists in Canada to defend our civil liberties that we can protest. I was inspired by the G20 Redux event, which took place on June 25, 2011 in Queen's Park in Toronto, one year after the G20 meeting. Determined organizers continue to work to expose police violence, demand a public inquiry, and fight for all charges against protestors to be dropped.

It is our responsibility to dissent

Ed Broadbent's response to my action very succinctly captures our responsibility to speak out despite sanctions from the establishment: "What's the real offence, silently watching growing injustice, or upsetting the sensibilities of those who should be doing something about it?" he asked.

When a government's agenda does not reflect the true values of its people – as is the case with the Harper government – it is up to every one of us to act to stop it. As Henry David Thoreau explained in his classic 1849 text titled *Civil Disobedience*, people have a duty not to permit their governments to overrule their consciences, and to not stand by while government makes them agents of injustice. As citizens of Canada during the Harper majority, we are agents of injustice so long as we are silent.

I have been enlightened by the teachings of many Indigenous peoples about the responsibility we all have to Mother Earth and future generations. This is explained by Aymara Elder Marcelo Saavedra-Vargas in *Crucial Indigenous Responsibilities*:⁴ "Given that we draw life from Mother Earth, we have a responsibility to protect her well-being. Given that we are expressions of nature, we have a responsibility to protect ourselves. Given that we are all interconnected and interdependent in the sacred circle of life, we have a responsibility to defend each other. Our responsibility does not end in the present, but until the next seven generations to come." By taking direct action and building a movement, we are taking responsibility for each other and for our common future.

MOVING BEYOND THE HILL AND USING PEOPLE POWER TO STOP HARPER'S AGENDA

The Conservative government may have more resources than we do, but this is dwarfed by the greatest power of all – people power.

Right after the action, while walking down Sparks street as a Conservative politician scorned me for what I had done, a young couple and their son cheered wildly! A 91-year-old man phoned me to say that he has wanted to do something like that his whole life. Two weeks after the action, as I was crossing Rideau Street to make my way to the library, a young woman wearing a hood tapped me on the shoulder, flashed me a thumbs up, and then ran away. These kinds of encounters convince me that people in Canada want change.

The Harper Record, by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), outlines the weakening of public services and the expansion of corporate powers under the Harper government.⁵ As the CCPA explains, the Conservative austerity agenda cuts corporate taxes, erodes social services, weakens democracy, criminalizes people of colour, expands prisons, and undermines women's rights. Naomi Klein explains that Harper has taken advantage of the economy to advance policies that benefit corporations instead of the public good.⁶ In a speech delivered at the first rally against Harper after the last election, Mohawk activist Ben Powless described how Harper's agenda undermines Indigenous rights.⁷ George Monbiot of *The Guardian* said that under Harper, Canada is turning itself into a "corrupt Petro-state"⁸ who could scarcely do more to destroy the biosphere if it tried.⁹

So what are we to do about it?

Using Collective Indignation as Fuel

I am guided by the words of Council of Canadians' National Chairperson Maude Barlow. Following the election of a Harper majority government, she referenced an old union saying about facing adversity and advised: "Don't mourn, organize!"¹⁰

How did you feel on election night when the Harper government took a majority despite the fact that only one in four people voted for him?¹¹ Like most Canadians, I felt discouraged and defeated. And like most Canadians, I also felt a deep sense of indignation. Later, I felt re-energized to learn that collective

5 The Harper Record, Edited by Teresa Healy, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, <http://www.policyalternatives.ca/Reports/2008/09/HarperRecord/index.cfm>

6 Naomi Klein, We Can't Lose This Moment, <http://www.naomiklein.org/articles/2008/12/cant-lose-this-moment>

7 Ben Powless, Rhetoric Vs Reality: Ben Powless On the Harper Government, <http://intercontinentalcry.org/rhetoric-vs-reality-ben-powless-on-the-harper-government/>

8 George Monbiot, The Urgent Threat to World Peace is... Canada, <http://www.monbiot.com/2009/12/01/the-urgent-threat-to-world-peace-is-%E2%80%A6-canada/>

9 George Monbiot, Foreword to the Canadian Edition of Heat

10 Maude Barlow, Maude Barlow's reaction to the 2011 election results: "Don't mourn – organize!", <http://www.vancouvercouncilofcanadians.ca/?p=634>

11 Federal Election Results, CBC, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadavotes2011/story/2011/05/03/cv-election-voter-turnout-1029.html>

indignation is a first step in building a movement to stop injustice. “Indignez-vous,” is a French expression for becoming outraged at injustice. This sense of unfairness was a key catalyst for many revolutions.¹² I am motivated by organizers and activists who are using their sense of indignation to fuel a movement. They have taught me that the best way forward is not to focus on what is done, but to get excited about what we can do. It’s exciting to imagine the movement we can build if we use our collective indignation to create the Canada we want.

Leveraging the power we have

As a Senate Page, I used the sliver of power that I had to voice my concerns. Actually, I was not the first Parliamentary Page to use the Page uniform to challenge injustice. In the 1990s, five House of Commons Pages wrote a letter to the Mulroney government opposing the testing of nuclear missiles in Alberta. They issued a press release to ensure that their opposition was heard and received national media attention for their action.

Not all of us have the option of protesting in front of Harper, the Governor General, and the Senate as I did. However, there are so many options for taking action, many more than I once thought. I have been amazed to discover the possibilities. In his book *The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, Gene Sharp outlines 198 ways to use non-violent resistance.¹³ Whether it’s through petitions, vigils, signs, skits, public speeches, literature, the media or other actions– the options are numerous. Economic boycotts or strikes, civil disobedience or government personnel blocking lines of command, fasts, non-violent raids, or guerilla theatre – there is a method for all of us. We can also join existing actions. For example, many of us joined the picket lines in solidarity with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) when they were locked out of their jobs by Canada Post management. Or we can come up with something new.

Anybody can be an activist

Activists are ordinary people, like you and me. It is disappointing to see how activists are often demonized in the media as misinformed (or uninformed) hooligans. This is a tactic used by those in power to prevent people from disobeying authority. In reality, protestors can be anybody. The activists that I know are interesting, engaging people who care about their communities and the planet. Far from being misinformed, they are among the most knowledgeable and forward-looking people I know. Far from being troublemakers who just want to stir things up for the hell of it, they are caring and responsible individuals. The activists I know are deeply troubled by the state of our world. They care so much that they are doing something about it.

There is a popular misconception that activism is only for young people. However, anybody can be an activist, regardless of age. My Dad says that not enough youth have come together to establish the critical mass it took to achieve the successes of the anti-war movement. This seems to suggest that building a movement is only up to young people when in fact, it the responsibility of all of us. It was not only young people whose protests helped to end the war in Vietnam, and it will take people of all ages to confront today’s battles as well.

12 Stéphane Hessel, *Indignez-vous*

13 Gene Sharp, 198 *Methods of Nonviolent Resistance*, <http://www.aeinstein.org/organizations103a.html>

I've been inspired to meet older people who are engaged and taking action. Take the Raging Grannies for example, a coalition of grandmothers united to stop war and promote social justice. They are strong voices at protests and actions. Another good example is Gandhi, who was 60 when he started his march against the salt tax and British Rule.

Taking action

During the days leading up to the action, I was nervous. But as the Governor General read his speech, I felt calmness. All of my frustrations with the neo-liberal agenda flashed in front of me. These thoughts carried me to make the first steps past the desks of the Senators. As a Page, my place was against the wall behind the desks of all the Senators. When I planted myself in front of Harper, I was precisely where a Page should not be, but felt like I was exactly where I should be.

I have realized that to create effective actions, we can learn through doing. It is not enough to think up interesting ideas; we need to try them. I find it helpful to think of actions as real world experiments, where we can only find out what methods are effective by testing them out. I was at a climate justice conference in Montreal when Judy Rebick offered simple yet empowering words: "Back then, we just did stuff." "We" referred to the women's movement of the 1970s. They had the spirit of determined experimentation needed to make fundamental changes.

It was not until I was walking past the desks of Senators to the middle of the Senate floor that I realized the power that I have, that we all have, to take action. I was as surprised as the Senators were. It was truly an incredible feeling.

Finding Courage

I have discovered that taking non-violent direct action requires courage – courage to live our values and do what we know is right despite society's attempt to normalize injustice by rewarding those who are silent and sanctioning those who speak out.

Some people have called my action courageous, and while I am grateful for the kind words, my one small action does not begin to compare to the courage of people struggling every day to survive and of those who risk their lives to stop injustice. What is truly courageous are the many Indigenous Peoples in Canada who have bravely put themselves on the line to defend the Commons – the land, air and water we all share and depend on. One of the most inspiring examples is the chief of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI), an Indigenous community in northern Ontario, who bravely drove a motorboat to prevent a mining company's plane from landing, effectively making it impossible for the company to mine on their land.¹⁴ This is exactly the kind of courage and creativity we all need to protect and build healthy relations with the land that make sustainable communities possible.

14 Art Manuel, Video: Naomi Klein, Chief Arthur Manuel, Avi Lewis on Canadian Movements, <http://canadiandimension.com/blog/3352/>

Joining together

One person can make a difference. However, there is no doubt we are stronger together. Actions can be even more effective when they are done in groups. The first step is to join with existing social movements in Canada – Indigenous Rights movements, women’s rights movements, labour movements, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer movements, anti-war movements, environmental justice movements, and citizen movements such as the Council of Canadians, which, among many others, are working for these issues simultaneously. We can make fundamental change when we bring our voices together.

Protesting outside of the box

Some people claimed my action was ill-timed and inappropriate because it disrupted the Speech from the Throne as it was delivered in the Senate. However, non-violent direct actions are often most effective when they are staged in unexpected ways and in surprising places. In Ottawa we cling to Parliament Hill as our stage for protests. Other towns and cities may have their own symbolic places. But if we want to be effective, we need to think more strategically and creatively. How can we make the most impact? We need to think outside the box, and beyond the Hill. The large number of people who came out in support for the action show the breadth of people in Canada who are ready for unconventional means to affect change.

A wonderful example of protesting outside the box is when activists staged an intervention during the signing ceremony for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992. The Council of Canadians, including National Chairperson Maude Barlow, was present as one activist held up an American flag behind Prime Minister Brian Mulroney as he signed the deal. The photo went viral. The image spoke truth to power by vividly showing how the Mulroney government was signing away Canada’s sovereignty to the United States. This action resonated with people all over Canada.

I am also inspired by UK Uncut, a movement that has emerged in Europe to challenge Britain’s cuts to social services, which offers many great ideas for people in Canada protesting against austerity in creative spaces. Hundreds of thousands of people have protested, and many have participated in inventive and well-orchestrated mass direct actions such as the occupation of banks.¹⁵ Similarly, the UK Uncut “Emergency Action” had people stage a “die-in” by dressing in doctor’s costumes and as sickly patients to show the harm caused when government makes cuts to the National Health System. They demonstrated that banks are the ones that are sick, gambling and causing the financial crisis, yet perversely, getting rewarded and bailed out by the government. By creating accessible and inventive actions in high-visibility locations, the movement has mobilized en masse against austerity.

Shifting power

I find it empowering to know that anybody can take action and bring about change. Power in Canada does not only flow downwards from the top, it also flows upwards from the bottom. Harper is powerless if citizens refuse to take orders or follow his agenda. Following Sharp’s consent theory of power, if people in Canada decide to stop obeying Harper’s agenda, power will shift back to us.

15 UK Uncut and student activists to join public sector strikers on 30 June by Matthew Taylor <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/jun/15/uk-uncut-joins-public-sector-strike-cuts?INTCMP=SRCH>

Think of the relationship between Harper’s government and Canadians as a house. The Harper government and his corporate friends are at the top; they are the roof. The rest of us are the walls of the house; we are the basis of support for the roof. When the walls of a house are removed, the roof is no longer supported. If we refuse to support Harper’s government, the roof falls.

But it’s not only under a majority Conservative government that we need to reclaim power. We need to do this in the face of any government that doesn’t reflect the values of its people. Sound decisions can only be shaped by the convictions and engagement of citizens.

During the struggle against British Occupation, Gandhi asked, “how can 100,000 British troops control 50 million Indians?”¹⁶ While coming from a very different context, his words resonated with me and shed light on our current reality. How can 166 Conservative MPs and 57 Conservative Senators dictate the future of 33 million Canadians? They can only do it if we let them.

16 [Steve York](#), [Miriam Zimmerman](#), [Peter Ackerman](#) and [Jack DuVall](#), A Force More Powerful [Film]

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Harper's agenda is part of a broader, global neo-liberal agenda. This agenda allows Canada to extract the dirtiest oil on Earth, pollute our air and water, and speed up climate change. It has been built on false assumptions that allow short-term economic gains to come before the long-term sustainability of our communities. It allows the profits of a few individuals to come before our collective well-being. It is the job of social movements – of us – not only to expose these false assumptions, but to challenge them.

When I first came to Ottawa, I denied the reality that the crises we face are political and systematic in nature. Despite knowing better, I did this because I did not see solutions to these broad problems and this made me feel helpless. I blamed other causes in order to be comforted by the illusion that taking shorter showers, giving to humanitarian NGOs, or voting was enough to change these realities. At the other extreme, after acknowledging the structural problems with our society, I felt as though the system was so corrupt that the only option was to disengage completely from politics.

Now I am honest with myself about the real and interwoven root causes of the many crises our society faces, from colonialism to patriarchy to neo-liberalism. I feel empowered knowing that social movements can confront these systems of power.

How is it that we have a Prime Minister that the majority of Canadians did not vote for? This can only result from a broken political system. Non-violent direct can challenge the deficient liberal democracy model and the faulty first-past-the-post voting system that allowed Harper to become our Prime Minister in the first place.

However, those in power make it appear as if the current model, the status quo, is not only inevitable, but unchangeable. In reality, the status quo is malleable. I now see that it is our job to change it.

Once again I am inspired by the UK Uncut movement which has orchestrated many direct actions to challenge the status quo. The dominant narrative in the UK purports that social services must be cut in order to control a deficit during an economic crisis. The UK Uncut movement takes creative action to challenge this assertion, revealing that the problem is not a lack of money, but a problem with *how* money is being spent. To show that the billions of dollars wasted on bailing out banks should instead be used for social programming, community members occupied banks and set up mock daycares beside ATMs. Their action cleverly sent the message that banks were the only space left to read to their children given the cuts to daycares.¹⁷ By challenging the status quo in a public space they were able to challenge the beliefs of those who may not otherwise question the status quo.

I am also inspired by actions taken by the environmental justice movement, including at last year's climate negotiations in Cancun. People have been deceived to think that the impacts of climate change will be felt in the far-off future. Youth climate activists exposed the truth that people are suffering the effects of climate change right now, most of whom come from the Global South. They are the least responsible for climate change, but suffer the most from it. Climate activists revealed this truth by mourning the 21,000 people who died due to climate change in the time between UN climate negotiations in Copenhagen and those in Cancun the following year.¹⁸ People directly impacted by

17 A different sort of tax revolt, Peter Gillespie, Toronto Star, <http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/article/951450--a-different-sort-of-tax-revolt>

18 Tasha Peters, The Media Co-op, <http://www.mediacoop.ca/blog/tasharpeters/5420>

climate change told their real-life stories of loved ones who had died. For example, an Indigenous woman spoke about her friends who died from cancer caused by extractive industry. Her story, and the community members and activists working in solidarity with her, made the issue impossible to deny.

Drawing inspiration from the Arab Spring

I've been awakened by the Arab Spring; by my peers rising up for democracy in North Africa and in the Middle East. Hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life took over Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt to demand fundamental democratic changes.

What started the uprisings in Egypt? This is the question author Rebecca Solnit asks in *Charting the Wild Winds of Change in 2011*.¹⁹ When did the injustices that were accepted for decades become unacceptable? When did fear subside and indignation take over to create collective action? Was it when Khaled Said, a young Egyptian man, revealed corruption from police forces and was killed for it? A Facebook page was subsequently made for him that stated: "We are all Khaled Said." Was it when rap artist El General posted a song about the expansive poverty and injustice in Egypt? Was it when another young person gave confidential reports to Wikileaks to reveal human rights violations by the U.S. military and who was subsequently arrested? The rise of people power in Egypt is not due to a single act, but was catalyzed by a mood that, together, these acts created.

I am honoured to have since received a message from young activists there supporting a Canadian grassroots uprising, affirming that Harper must be stopped and that Canada needs its own Arab Spring; that we truly need a "Canadian Spring."

My peers from Egypt have in fact called for a "World Spring" – a flowering of social movements worldwide that will address whatever ills exist in each respective country.

19 Rebecca Solnit, *The Butterfly and the Boiling Point: Charting the Wild Winds of Change in 2011*

DISCOVERING THE RICH TRADITION OF DIRECT ACTION IN CANADA

Since my action, it has been exciting to discover that there is a tradition of people taking action in Canada to challenge the status quo and unjust governments. Unlike throne speeches, community activism and people power is a tradition that I can identify with.

Canada has had a long and vibrant history of civil disobedience with people using direct actions for a myriad of issues – from labour rights, to Indigenous sovereignty, to rights for French-speaking people. Some of the most well-known examples come from Greenpeace, an environmental organization started in Canada in the 1970s to resist the overlapping injustices of war and environmental degradation.²⁰ By sailing boats into nuclear test areas to stop detonations, staging sit-ins and peaceful occupations, and placing boats in the path of whaling ships, Greenpeace has found creative ways to raise awareness and stop injustices.

People in Canada have often used people power to defend our collective rights. Indeed, it is thanks to the bold actions of workers who withdrew their labour during the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike that we enjoy many of the employment standards that we have today. When institutional routes failed workers, and city council refused labourers' request for a wage increase, workers united to demand fair working conditions. While companies enjoyed large profits on military contracts during the First World War, labourers made abysmal wages and faced unbearable working conditions. As 6,800 workers from 13 different trades joined together to form the largest general strike in Canada's history, they made it clear that they would not accept oppressive working conditions. Continuing to strike after city council tried to ban them from doing so, they won public support and set the political climate for labour reforms – from collective bargaining rights to union recognition. These hard-won rights continue to be essential in the struggle for fair wages and working standards today. The strike laid the groundwork for a "wellspring of social legislation."²¹

Another great example of the progress that can be achieved through people power comes from the labour movement's "On To Ottawa" trek of the 1930s. Workers from Western Canada rallied to voice their concerns about unemployment relief camps established by the federal government in the height of the Depression. They demands included pay increases and changes to the deplorable working conditions. But R.B. Bennett's Conservative government refused to listen. The labourers bravely withdrew their labour and fled Vancouver by train in an original kind of strike. United, they made their way to Ottawa where they would file a complaint with the federal government to demand better working conditions. Weathering police violence in Regina, they gained mass public support as they traveled the country. Despite the government's attempts to repress them, their action was key to exposing injustices of the Bennett government and eventually toppling his majority, making way for a government more amenable to civil society demands. A strengthened labour movement was subsequently able to pressure the new government to abolish the camps.²²

Today we see the Harper government attempting to undermine organized labour (which should be considered as a testimony to labour's strength.) A clear illustration of Harper's anti-union agenda was

20 Non-violent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective, Edited by Zunes, Kurtz,
21 Profiles in Dissent, Gutkin and Gutkin
22 On to Ottawa Trek, Onto Ottawa Historical Society, <http://www.ontoottawa.ca/index1.html>

his decision to ignore the collective bargaining rights of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. When recent negotiations led Canada Post Corporation (CPC) management to lock out workers, Harper, at the behest of CPC management, intervened to end the deadlock and his government passed back-to-work legislation that ignored workers' rights to represent their interests at the bargaining table. Despite Harper's efforts to thwart their union, CUPW has only gained strength through this struggle, and continues to organize to build an even more powerful worker's movement.

As we have seen, movements in Canada have been somewhat unconnected from one another historically – worker's movements from environmental movements and so forth. My hope for Canada lies in the joining together of these social movements in order to gain greater strength.

BUILDING AN INTERGENERATIONAL MOVEMENT

Since my action, I have found it incredibly valuable to meet with older activists. It has been reassuring to realize that they have been grappling for years with many of the same dilemmas that I am today. It is also inspiring to see the great joy and meaning these activists derive from activism. This is the same joy I am feeling as I begin doing grassroots work.

I am grateful for the insights that older activists have shared with me. Through exchanges with them, I am beginning to understand what has and has not worked in Canada in the past. I think that younger activists like me have a lot to learn from the experiences and insights of more seasoned organizers. Through intergenerational learning, we can help ensure mistakes are not repeated and build on the victories and the important groundwork laid by our predecessors.

Surrounded by student activists and peers working on campaigns from bottled water-free campuses to boycotts to blockades, I see the incredible energy and clarity of vision that young people can bring to the movement. It is not only younger activists who could benefit from learning and working with seasoned activists, but older activists can also benefit from working with young community organizers.

Imagine the kind of synergy that could be forged by the coming together of the fresh and steadfast vision of young people with the political know-how and experience of older activists.

I would love to see more intergenerational learning take place. Progressives could do more to mentor young leaders. Community organizer Ashley Burczak explains that, “The Right has prioritized efforts to build young leaders [...] developing structures enabling new activists to enter their communities, educating those activists on the core tenets of the movement, and providing them with the skills they need to lead.”²³ This kind of cross-generational learning would be extremely beneficial for young activists.

The Next Up Program is one great example of older activists creating a space for intergenerational learning. It is perhaps the closest thing Canada has to an activist school. Through a mentorship program, participants train in the areas of critical analysis, media and communication skills, and community organizing. Participants complete a community placement and young people receive the guidance they need to grow as community leaders and activists.²⁴

While mentoring and training of young activists by older ones is key, I also see that there needs to be more space for younger activists, who have often spearheaded blossoming grassroots groups, to put forward and live out their visions. It is important that older activists ask themselves not only how they can engage youth in what they are doing, but also how they can support the grassroots work young people are doing. How can we come together?

I’ve been encouraged to discover the kinds of forward-thinking, yet politically sound campaigns, that can be built when “green and grown” (or young and old) activists team up together. One example is the

23 Ashley Burczak, *It’s Not My Job to Educate You: How anti-oppression activists are failing to build a movement*, *Our Schools Ourselves*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

24 Kevin Millsip, *Where Do We Go From Here? Building an intergenerational movement*, in *Our Schools, Ourselves* by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA)

Save Our Prison Farms Campaign in Kingston, Ontario, which includes people of all ages – from a junior high school student to grandparents. Together, this intergenerational group organized an advocacy and educational campaign and bravely blockaded their cattle to stop Harper from shutting down their prison farm. (While the farm eventually fell victim to Harper’s tough on crime agenda, I remain inspired by this group whose members refuse to give up the struggle for food sovereignty and restorative justice and continue to strategize on next steps.)

In terms of intergenerational campaigns, I was thrilled to hear about the sit-in staged in John Baird’s office by young people in solidarity with the striking postal workers. While the action did not receive the attention it deserved, it’s a good example of the kinds of student and worker solidarity actions that we need to see more of.

Another way to build intergenerational links is by parents mobilizing with their children. It is wonderful to see parents who are supportive of their children’s activism. Still, the best way for parents to support their children would be to join them on the streets. We need movement-parents. Harper’s agenda is going to make it very difficult for people my age in the future: his inaction on climate change will compromise clean air and water, his attack on pensions and social programs make future prospects for young people much bleaker. If parents want to ensure a secure and healthy life for their children, they should consider joining their children and other young people to mobilize.

It is exciting to imagine the kind of change we can create when people of all ages join together. With mentorship programs and intergenerational solidarity and campaigns, as well as the prospect of movement-parents, I am hopeful that links between younger and older generations in Canada are beginning to form.

THE EFFECTS OF TAKING ACTION AND PROSPECTS FOR OUR MOVEMENT

It is exciting to think about the future of social movements in Canada. What if we decide to make the leap and collectively take action to create a better Canada? If the past is any indicator for the future, a plethora of positive impacts will follow.

I know firsthand that when one person or group takes action, it gives other people strength and courage by reminding us of the power we all have. I've been inspired by people in Canada taking action, like the campaign of climate activists, students, and Indigenous community members who stood up to UrbanDale Construction Corporation and Richcraft Homes to stop them from cutting down a forest near Beaver Pond in Kanata, a small community outside of Ottawa, Ontario. While the action was not successful in the sense that the developers eventually cut down the trees, it was successful in the sense that it inspired me and many others in the movement to defend the rights of nature and Indigenous rights. When a butterfly flaps its wings, it can cause the earth to shake. When one person takes action against injustice, other actions will follow and culminate in shaking the world of injustice.

I have discovered the wealth of evidence that shows the effect non-violent direct action can have on people by ending submissiveness, increasing fearlessness, revealing one's power, increasing self-esteem, bringing hope and satisfaction, taming aggression and violence, and increasing group unity.²⁵

Since my own action, I have felt a sense of fearlessness I have not felt before. When I saw Stephen Harper at the movie theatre two years ago, I felt the urge to do something, but I held back. I wanted to scold him for pillaging the dirtiest energy of all in the tar sands to perpetuate an unhealthy oil addiction; for stealing Indigenous land and poisoning our water; for subsidizing big business while eroding the social safety net the rest of us depend on. Instead, I muttered meekly, "Did you like the film?" By taking action, I proved to myself that I am no longer afraid.

Democracy is as much a process as it is an atmosphere. That atmosphere of change has been fermenting throughout much of the world as we saw with the Arab Spring. What would it take to bring that mood here to Canada?

So many people are already working to stop Harper and his agenda. Many choose to work quietly. What if our efforts began to express themselves in the streets instead of in the privacy of our homes and offices? We are beginning to see this. In the past few years, there has been remarkable surge in public protests in Canada. Look at the thousands of people who protested at the G20. The movement is building.

What would a peaceful uprising look like in Canada? We would not only come together virtually, showing solidarity on Facebook and on the internet, but with our bodies. We would move from our homes and tight-knit circles of friends and into the streets. By coming together physically, we embody our unity and common vision. By converging as a public, we show our breadth and power. Our vision for a more democratic and just society is no longer something we read about and talk about. We see it. We feel it in the bodies beside us. We hear it in our chants.

25 The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Gene Sharp

CONCLUSION

It is time for our Arab Spring, our water war, our civil rights movement

Following my action, I've been trying to get my hands on as much information about direct action and movement building as I can. But as I read history books about non-violent direct action, examples from Canada are generally missing. I look for them in the table of contents, but they are not there. I envision a day when the movement we are growing will be cited alongside amazing movements for justice and democracy that are happening around the world. It is time for our Arab Spring. It is time for our civil rights movement. It is time for our water war. Let's put Canada on the map of mass non-violent action by building a movement of people who will fight for human rights, Indigenous rights, the rights of nature, and the rights of future generations.

I used to be afraid to question, to challenge, to dream, to experiment, but no longer. I am beginning to discover the power of dreaming seriously about a better Canada and working with others to create it. I once shared in the misconception that Harper has been given free rein to do as he pleases. But now I realize that he hasn't – all Canadians have a hold on the reins too and we can help steer our country on a better course. We are united through the Commons – through water, democracy, the economy, health needs. Hope for Canada over the next four years and beyond lies not with government, but with the rest of us, organizing together for a country based on our own voices, values and vision.

The flourishing of people power in Egypt is thanks to a myriad of unions, organizers and committed individuals who did not wait for change. They became the change. What is incredible is that here, too, each one of us has the power to bring about change. As Rebecca Solnit explains, "young women in veils and an unknown 20-year-old rapping in Arabic and you yourself, if you wanted it, sometimes have tremendous power, enough to bring down a dictator, enough to change the world." I have been inspired most of all by Asmaa Mahfouz, the 26-year-old woman who issued a video calling for Egyptians to join her in Tahrir Square. People did, and they together made the Egyptian revolution. Her words will always stay with me: "As long as you say there is no hope, then there will be no hope, but if you go and take a stand, then there will be hope."

FURTHER READING

George Lakey, *Nonviolent Action as the Sword that Heals*

Casino Free Philadelphia, *Direct Action Manual*

smartMeme, *Re-imagining Change: An Introduction to story-based strategy*

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