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## Taking Root: The rise of Grassroots Activism in Canada

by Elizabeth Berman

Grassroots movements are springing up across the country at a record pace. But what exactly are grassroots movements? What's behind their growth? And how can they flourish? We asked grassroots activists for their thoughts.

September 2011: One thousand people converge in downtown Manhattan after a call from the Canadian-based Adbusters Media Foundation, and the Occupy movement is born. Its slogan – “We are the 99%” – becomes shorthand for the injustice created by economic and social inequality. This rallying cry quickly spreads across the continent, attracting a new generation of activists to protests across Canada.

Lana Goldberg got involved with Occupy Toronto. For 40 days she lived in St. James Park, and continued to organize even after being evicted. “To me, grass-

roots activism is non-institutionalized organizing carried out by ordinary people, often by those most affected by unjust structures,” said Goldberg. “It tends to operate in solidarity with other struggles and with all oppressed people.”

By 2012, the Occupy camps were gone, but the awareness they created and the activists they energized are still having an impact. And now another grassroots movement was on the horizon. The Harper government’s omnibus budget bills, with their devastating changes to environmental regulations, inspired Indigenous people to take action to protect the land and water. First Nations were now “Idle No More.”

“It means that the people have the power,” said Nina Was’te, one of the four women from Saskatchewan who founded Idle No More, when asked what grassroots activism means to her. “People have

been disengaged for far too long and are dissatisfied with the results.”

Meanwhile in Ottawa, a diverse cross-section of environmental, labour and social justice groups attended a one-day meeting hosted by the Council of Canadians. In January 2013, they came together to launch Common Causes, an assembly of movements that seeks to unite grassroots activists tackling a range of interconnected issues.

“Grassroots activism is ordinary people getting together to work on an issue, solve a common problem or create an alternative,” said Judy Rebick, a well-known writer, activist and feminist who attended the initial Common Causes meeting. “It has been on the rise now for a couple of years.”

Paul Manly, a Council of Canadians chapter activist and board member

The Idle No More movement gained momentum across the country, uniting voices against the Harper government’s massive cuts to environmental regulations.



**Left: Hundreds of people joined an Idle No More rally on Parliament Hill. Right: Common Causes, an assembly of social movements, stood in solidarity with Idle No More at a rally in Halifax in January.**

from Nanaimo, B.C., believes that grassroots activism is definitely on the rise in his part of the country: “People are becoming more aware of the threats posed by the Harper Conservatives and are getting engaged and taking action. Gathering together to take action creates solidarity and community and eliminates the sense that we are fighting these battles alone.”

“Grassroots organizing and campaigning must be community-based, very inclusive and definitely broad,” said Roy Brady, a Council of Canadians chapter activist and board member from Peterborough, Ontario. He attributes its rise to the momentum created by Idle No More, as well as a growing number of local concerns. Brady has been instrumental in uniting local activists working on a variety of different issues under the banner of Common Causes, recently winning a fight to stop tritium pollution in the community.

### **Growing pains**

Grassroots movements are not without their challenges, however. An egalitarian, leaderless structure encourages participation, but can also make it difficult to make a decision, let alone communicate it effectively. But not everyone views the lack of a traditional leadership structure as a disadvantage – some see it as quite the opposite.

“Leaders can be co-opted, intimidated and silenced,” said Manly. “When you have leaderless movements you share responsibilities, it’s more inclusive and people can get engaged in ways that are meaningful to them. With the Mid-Island chapter we intentionally have a leaderless structure without an executive; anyone who wants to lead an activity is able to pitch it to the group and take it on.”

Rebick disagrees that the lack of a single leader implies a lack of leadership: “There is leadership, but it is a new kind of leadership, not always visible. Leadership roles are spread much more broadly.”

“We have been fed the notion we will be lost without top-down leadership,” said Was’te. “The truth of it is we do not disrespect leadership, we just want to challenge what is not working.”

And what if the grassroots model of diffuse leadership doesn’t seem to be working?

“We need to remind ourselves to be creative, respectful and mindful that every person brings a gift to a group,” says Leticia Adair, a founding member of the Saint John chapter of the Council of Canadians and a board member. The chapter is currently working on a local

Common Causes initiative to stop the privatization of a municipal wastewater facility. “It takes time and energy to build a movement.”

### **Finding Solutions**

Being able to work on a variety of issues keeps grassroots movements nimble and striving for solutions.

“Grassroots movements today are looking to change the system, not just one or two problems,” says Rebick. “I think groups should solve the problems as they see them and not allow media or politicians to define their problems.”

Goldberg sees money as one of those problems: “What many groups are lacking is funding, which can limit capacity. With additional support, participation and funding, grassroots groups could thrive and really transform society.”

Common Causes and the Council of Canadians plan to help bring about this societal transformation, working together in support of – and with support from – the many grassroots mobilizations and campaigns that strive to build a more progressive society.

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