



FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Climate Camp's direct democracy for direct action: not far enough

Halina Ward, August 2009

Climate change presents the biggest challenge to democracy of any in the burgeoning list of environmental and social pressures. And there is already a body of evidence that climate change is shaping democracy. Climate Camp offers some examples.

Earlier this year, I went to a Climate Camp meeting in London. In the wake of the London G20 protests, I was interested to learn more about Climate Camp, but also casting about for inspiration for work on “direct action, democracy and sustainable development”. Please comment if you have ideas on that.

I asked one of the climate campers what we could usefully do as a small organisation, and the response was roughly this: “Publicise our work. The way we make decisions is completely democratic; we work by consensus, and we’re an example of democracy in action”.

In July, Liam Taylor of the Camp for Climate Action offered a similar sentiment in his talk to participants at a Radical Democracy session organised at the Compass conference. The talk, Democracy Lived - the example of Climate Camp, has been published on [OpenDemocracy](#).

As someone who is often asked to “define what you mean by democracy” in conversations with people who demand precise answers, I found this part particularly powerful:

“I think we should worry less about the intricacies of voting systems and more about creating meaningful democratic experiences. And if you’re trying to find those experiences in the formal institutions of state, I’m afraid you’re looking in the wrong place. The word ‘democracy’ does not refer to a set of institutions; it refers to a process, a movement. Every day - in our jobs, in our homes, in our communities - we travel through uneven landscapes of power. For me, democracy exists at those liminal moments when landscapes of power are in some way transformed by the collective action of ordinary people. That happens within Climate Camp. I’ve felt it happen, too, in other places, such as assemblies I’ve attended organized by London Citizens”.

Liam Taylor ended:

“Let’s see democracy as journey, not destination; let’s stop worrying about where we end up, and start thinking about where we begin. I think that at Climate Camp we have a very strong sense that the project of revivifying democracy does not begin with a constitutional convention; it does not begin with electoral reform; it does not begin with citizen’s juries, or people’s peers, or independent MPs, or any of the other ideas you get coming out of the political and media elite. It begins with ordinary people, like you and me, taking action on something we believe in, and transforming society by first transforming ourselves. Because democracy is not something which is given, it is not something which is created from above - it is something which is won“.

But the point of this post is not so much to highlight Liam Taylor’s presentation, but to highlight another move in the direction of direct democracy of a climate change-engendered sort.

Climate Camp has empowered any person who chooses to feel so empowered to influence, quite directly, the direct action of other people, whether or not he or she chooses to join in. And it doesn’t matter whether you’re registered to vote, or a citizen of the UK or anywhere else.

www.thegreatclimateswoop.org asks readers to:

“Join the Great Climate Swoop on the 17th & 18th October 2009 as we close down a coal-fired power station, democratically and together, to say enough is enough. All you have to do is pick which coal station we should close, and then turn up there with your friends on Saturday 17th October”.

When I first looked at the website, a couple of days after the voting had been launched, there were 268 votes in favour of targeting Ratcliffe on Soar, with 203 in favour of Drax. A little later the site’s transparency had reduced: it became possible only to see percentage outcomes of the votes, not how many votes have been cast. And by the time the end result was published, only the outcome was visible rather than the percentages or the numbers of voters (Ratcliffe on Soar was the target ultimately selected in the vote).

This is certainly a form majoritarian direct democracy. But is it fair? Shouldn’t we be able to see how many people voted?

There are also issues here about strategic and tactical choices normally made by campaigners rather than any external undefined ‘constituency’. What is the impact of a ‘Ratcliffe’ outcome on activists who might prefer to tackle the significantly higher carbon

emissions of Drax (single largest emitter of CO2 in the UK) rather than those of Ratcliffe (Largest investor owned power company in the world)? Does respect for the 'authority' of the process mean protestors should head to Ratcliffe regardless?

What if Drax had come out on top but you felt that it was really important that you direct your limited time as an activist to tackle the globally bigger player?

Accepting the authority and legitimacy of a decision taken by campaigners who you know and trust is one thing; but accepting the authority of anonymous computer voting as you head off to break the law for a cause seems quite another.

Applying direct democracy to this kind of strategic decision, and unpicking its implications, underscores the tactical and strategic choices that campaign groups make on a daily basis. Do you go for the company with the biggest brand, the one with the biggest impacts; the one that's most likely to be ready to change (and so on)?

Reducing tactical choices to a simple and anonymous vote on a computer screen, where only the tally or the outcome are transparent and the hustings consist of the most basic facts, is simple. But is it something we really want more of? Were shareholders of Drax with a short-term vision of profit perhaps voting tactically behind their computer screens to ensure that their company's power station wasn't the one to be hit? Might they launch a competitor site perhaps, targeting windfarms or nuclear power?

By making democracy itself a core part of its credo, Climate Camp offers potential to dish up some thought-provoking dishes. But how best to incorporate these within a vision of vibrant, resilient democracy in a climate-constrained world?

The [Great Climate Swoop website](#) includes some thoughts on the wider democratic significance of the online vote.

"The decision to vote for Drax or Ratcliffe is .. trivial. Not because the decision to publicly take mass direct action to shut down a coal-fired power station is not significant but because the two choices are relatively similar as in the end.

Both need to be shut down and as we couldn't really decide which to do first we thought we'd leave it up to the randomness of an internet vote...The significant decision to shut down one of the two biggest coal-fired power stations in the UK was agreed by... consensus. That is to say consensus of the open and public group that is organising the event.

We didn't ask everyone in the world if we should shut it down because it needs to be done anyway. Not to do so would be to undermine our prospects of a future worth living in. Do we usually ask others if we can defend ourselves from attack?

Governments and political parties hide behind what they laughably call ‘democracy’ to justify burning more and more coal, despite their knowledge that it will lead to catastrophic climate change and billions of ruined lives.”

Climate Camp’s online voting is fun; and it points to the need for democratic innovation in the face of climate change. But the tactic doesn’t lead far enough; to the real and urgent need to find ways of enabling representative democracy to play its role in delivering effective climate policy.