

When a whole community says: **STOP! ENOUGH!**

Kenneth McLeod, 22.06.2014: I recently recorded an interview with Simon Clough, chairperson of the national Lock the Gate Alliance and deputy mayor of Lismore. In it he reflected on the LTG social movement model as evident in the recent four-months long Bentley Blockade. This movement has successfully blocked industrial gasfield development in the Northern Rivers region. It reflects the rise of grassroots movements to protect the commons by non-violent direct action. I've extracted the following summary from the interview.

SIMON CLOUGH: Social movements promote participatory democracy. They are a grassroots response when the existing democratic system fails to respond to a major issue. Social movements understand that ultimately the power in the community lies with the people themselves and that the powerholders and politicians will eventually have to change or be swept aside by the power of the social movement. Our success at Bentley was built on at least six major pillars...

1. A commitment to a whole-of-community approach - deliberately setting out to bridge deep political and social divisions within the community

There are some people in our Northern Rivers community who never got over the Terania Creek rainforest protest. Even though it was in '79 and is now celebrated as a great victory for the environment - which it was - it was also deeply divisive in the wider community. That was one of the reasons why, in 2012, as co-ordinators we weren't going to repeat that experience. Thirty-five years later we knew we needed to build a grassroots campaign that was inclusive of all aspects of our community.

Easy to say, yet the practice of going door-to-door and building literally household by household a movement across the Northern Rivers took a lot of resources and commitment but resulted in the strength to stop unconventional gas development at least at this stage at Bentley. Once the momentum of a process like this builds and people start to realise the power of connecting with their neighbours, their street, their village/neighbourhood, and their whole community, it becomes self-perpetuating.

2. A clear common purpose - providing a single values focus across the whole community

One of the things that is fascinating about a social movement is, because such an enormous amount of energy is generated with a particular focus - to stop the drilling in this case - lots of people are attracted to it, many of whom bring their own causes. Many of them feel they can harness part of the social movement energy to advance their own cause. So they try to get other people involved to collaborate with them. The impact of these actions can feel like there are many agendas running at once and these "parallel causes" can derail the movement.

It takes significant clarity and steadfastness to see that yes, these other causes are all valid, but that's not the purpose of

this exercise. The campaign must be clearly focussed on a common purpose which, at Bentley, was stopping Metgasco getting its drilling rig onto the property. Easily said but extremely difficult to achieve in practice in the field where you're working 20 hours a day, with multiple crises going on, and there's all sorts of agendas running. In these circumstances keeping that overall clarity of purpose is a challenge. I think what we saw at Bentley in particular was that we had a lot of people of sufficient calibre able to hold the common purpose in a very difficult and confusing situation.

3. A commitment to non-violent direct action - involving both a wide understanding of the principles and values of non-violence and the building of practical non-violent skills

Our non-violent action training group was involved in the training of at least 1,000 people for Bentley. The impact of this is hard to assess in some senses because you don't actually see it at the time, but it does permeate the whole movement and I've seen the flowering of those ideas and principles in a whole lot of ways. You do have to keep reminding people in a camp like at Bentley and on the blockade that that's what we stand for, but in the end it becomes part of the DNA of the whole operation and people respond really well to each other with respect.

When people practice non-violence and begin to feel compassion for all the people involved, it doesn't mean they become weak or start to give in. It means they have more understanding, for instance, of the lot of the farmer who is willing to consider allowing his land to be drilled because he believes he needs the extra income, or compassion for the police who are sent to do a job that someone else determines and, of course, exercising compassion for each other on the blockade and in the camp. There were times when some people did the wrong thing and we had to deal with it in a way that made sense and was acceptable to other people in the camp.

Compassion was also seen in the way we were able to see each other's weaknesses and accept them and work with them, and not take that as an opportunity to take advantage or humiliate another person. In a real practical sense that was non-violence in action, expressed as respect. If you can have compassion for someone with whom you don't necessarily agree, you can respect them much more. That was another essential element of the whole blockade. You

can't run something like this without that ethos of mutual respect. That respect also extended to the land itself, respect for the beauty of the place, respect for the creeks and the water, and respect for the voiceless elements of our natural environment. Indeed, this was one of the fundamentally profound reasons why we were there. This permeated the whole camp and the blockade.

Our commitment to non-violence was critical in dealing with the police. If we hadn't been able to say, hand on heart, we are committed to non-violence and non-violent blockading, we would not have had that platform to negotiate from with the police and that would have been extremely difficult for us. If we had shown ourselves to be an uncontrolled rabble, I think it would have been a very, very different result. In that way the profound commitment to non-violence on the part of the majority of people at the blockade and in the camp gave us an enormous advantage and was an absolutely significant element in our being able to hold the line at Bentley.

4. Distributed Leadership - a real commitment to empower people to take leadership whenever circumstances required it

In many ways distributed leadership was a practical necessity. The operation was so big and the culture of the people involved has a fair degree of anti-authoritarianism, that there was no way we were going to have a 'king' or 'queen' of the camp or anything of that nature. It was really going to be how well we could create systems of leadership that allowed people to step forward and take on responsibility and which supported them in doing that.

There has to be leadership and followership, and that's always a delicate balance. You lead in some things and you follow in others and sometimes you're so incredibly grateful to follow. That requires a sense of respect for the other people involved. It's a dance where you follow in this particular situation because you've got trust and respect for the people who are leading and in another situation you feel you have the capacity and the ability to lead so you take responsibility and deal with whatever is arising as best you can. Ideally people will follow and support you in doing that. Part of its beauty is: 'a', there's no alternative because we can't establish a hierarchy in this sort of situation, and 'b', more importantly, it gives the opportunity for a whole lot of people to take up a role and get respect and kudos for stepping forward.

5. A Cultural Underpinning - expressed through creating specific opportunities to celebrate and enact the shared values of respect, compassion and solidarity

These celebrations are absolutely critical. One of the really important elements at Bentley was the contribution of the Aboriginal people who were there - the original custodians of

this land. They were able to articulate in so many ways their deep connection with country, their deep understanding of the impact this drilling would have on country. They were an integral part of the 'Greet the Dawn' ceremonies or rituals that happened every day, and an integral part of the evening gatherings.

These rituals were also occasions where distributed leadership was on display. It might be said, for example, we need three people to be in 'arrestable' situations tonight at Gate A, and usually three people would put up their hands. Not only was there a practical purpose there but these were extremely powerful symbols of people saying 'I take leadership here, I'm going to do this'. Whether it was front line action, or cleaning the toilets, being on the information stall, or any of the myriad of things that had to be done.

Those rituals not only displayed the spiritual values, the connection, the respect, the role of the Original people, but also showed the pragmatic ability of this group of people to take care of themselves and each other in a way that was distributed and voluntary. It was extraordinary, particularly when you consider that the camp went on for four months and for two and a half of those months we had an awful lot of people there - hundreds - and on the blockade, thousands. These rituals were symbolic, they were great expressions of the shared values of the people on the blockade and in the camp. This is vitally important to creating solidarity for the campaign.

Of course another facet of the action's cultural underpinning were events that were simply fun - making music, having visiting celebrities, high tea with the Bentleys, frocks on Friday, and any number of other activities that people just enjoyed.

6. Courage - to go beyond comfortable roles and taken-for-granted assumptions and step into the unknown

So many people at Bentley displayed courage, the ability to step outside ones normal comfort zones. In its more extreme forms it was obvious in the people who scaled the high mono-poles and were prepared to lock on to them, trusting that the police would eventually be able to move them without endangering their lives. The 'simmos' who were prepared to endure hours and hours of danger and discomfort while the police removed them from their lock-on installations.

It was also evident in people who had never even thought to associate with a blockade, but felt that the Bentley issue was so important that they overcame their media induced fear of 'extremists' and 'radical activists' to come out to the blockade and participate. Needless to say these people quickly found the reality of the blockade far from the media hype.