

(NATIONAL CITIZENS GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS CAN ONLY SUCCEED IF THEY AVOID THESE 6 COMMON POLITICAL MISTAKES – A CHAPTER OF A NEW BOOK BY JIM BRITELL)

## GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS THAT OVERCAME POWERFUL OPPONENTS

In the last hundred and twenty-five years grassroots organizing movements have forced the passage of laws on suffrage, prohibition, social security, civil rights and the environment that were opposed by America's most powerful institutions. Powerful grassroots movements have prevailed even when all the political, business interests and the public were initially opposed. All successful ones used remarkably similar approaches and methods to first change public opinion and then channel these new attitudes into legislation. But in the last 50 years we seem to have lost the latter ability to channel widespread public opinion into law and policy.

A perfect example of the disconnect between public outrage and law and policy is the trillion-dollar housing mortgage scam that banksters perpetuated in 2008 that ruined the economy and the lives of millions. The circumstances and facts of this scandal have been explained in countless newspaper and magazine articles, TV programs, movies and tens of millions of FB posts so the public abhorrence of criminal banksters is universal. Yet, almost decade later no responsible crook has gone to jail, even though during all this time the country's federal law enforcement was under the control of supposedly progressive Democrats.

On the other hand, in 1988 we had an example of just how fast Congress will pass laws when a nationwide grassroots campaign is effectively mobilized. Back then a Medicare expansion act which expanded many benefits for seniors passed both houses of congress in landslide votes of 328-72 house and 86-11 in the senate. Since it required some affluent seniors to pay additional taxes a grassroots campaign sprung up to mobilize seniors against it and the bill was repealed a year later 360-66 in the house, 99-0 in the senate.

*A successful grassroots campaign educates the public to create anger and awareness and concern and then channels that concern into political action that creates laws and regulations, which are not later repealed or ignored.*



### **Prohibition Campaign 1900-1919**

National grassroots campaign against alcohol active from before 1900 until it succeeded in getting the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment to outlaw alcoholic beverages in the United States passed in 1919, which was repealed in 1933 by the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Its leader was Wayne Wheeler a master organizer who was for a time the most powerful political person in the US.

Expecting mere public opinion disconnected from grassroots organizing to result in political action is like trying to drive a car with the transmission in neutral. You can start the engine and rev it up but it will sit there until you put the car in gear. A very tiny motor when connected will create some action but the biggest engine in the most powerful car in the world running at full throttle if left in neutral will never move.

If we expect to ever get needed fundamental reforms to anything from health care to education or the environment or stop the likely upcoming efforts to sell off or give away the public lands we will need to employ the common campaign strategies of past great campaigns:

1. educating voting constituents of legislators with authority over the issue
2. changing the attitudes of *all* the public on the issue
3. barnstorming – legions of traveling educators/speakers that visit *everywhere*
4. charismatic leaders
5. little or no involvement of foundations or non-profits
6. establishing many local chapters with large numbers of members

These are organizing principles/essential components that form the core of this book. They are lessons from past and recent successful campaigns and as important campaigns which initially seemed successful but lacked one or more of these components so the laws they passed were later repealed or ignored.



### **Townsend Movement to lobby for old age pensions**

begun by American doctor in 1933 which led to passage of social security in 1935. At its peak had 2.5 million members and 7000 chapters.



### **1. Successful campaigns focus on the voting constituents of key legislators**

Prohibition's first important success was to defeat 60 incumbent legislators in Ohio who would not support state prohibition legislation. Thereafter this campaign demonstrated they could defeat in primaries any candidate for state or federal office who did not support prohibition and proved better than any other grassroots campaign that if you get legislators afraid of you by showing that you can turn them out of office, you can pass anything, even legislation the whole legislative body opposes. But Prohibition's later repeal, and the quick repeal of the Medicare legislation and the failure of the country to allow blacks to vote after the constitutional amendments after the civil war clearly gave them that right. Illustrate a second rule of successful organizing.

## 2. Successful campaigns change laws because/after they change public opinion

The Townsend movement of the 1930's that led to the passage of Social Security convinced Americans that workers needed pensions and the suffrage movement convinced Americans that Women should have the right to vote just like men. Today neither of these ideas or laws have serious opposition. On the other hand, the Prohibition movement never convinced the American public that it was bad to drink and the constitutional amendment it managed to get adopted was later repealed. Civil rights amendments after the civil war giving blacks the right to vote were not accompanied by any educational campaign to convince white Americans that blacks were equal to whites or even that blacks were human beings; so the civil rights amendments after the civil war were not enforced until a hundred years later when the civil rights campaigns of the 1960's convinced whites that blacks were humans too. Civil rights laws of 1870 were passed before changing public attitudes and were thus unenforced, the civil rights law of the 1960s passed after public opinion was changed by MLK and are enforced.

### 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments 1868-1870

Unequivocally gave blacks the right to vote after the civil war, and subsequently many black Congressmen, Senators and State representatives were elected in southern states. But beginning in the 1880's white terrorist groups began murdering blacks who held office or tried to vote so blacks lost the right to vote until the mid 1960's.



Laws and Constitutional amendments can't permanently protect anything unless the voting public supports the values underlying the laws. Successful grassroots campaigns that change laws and people support usually include a third feature.

### 3. Successful Campaigns have always used barnstormers (large numbers of traveling speakers, lecturers, educators educating all the public on the issue). Campaigns without Barnstorming seldom achieve permanent success.

Successful campaigns like Social Security, women's suffrage, the original Earth Day (which led to the EPA and clean air and water laws), and Adirondack Wilderness all had huge numbers of traveling speakers. Movements that made permanent legislative and social change that are able to resist efforts to reverse them even decades later usually engaged in massive public information campaigns on a scale impossible to imagine today. The thousands of Townsend clubs which organized for social security had millions of members and the suffragettes had tens of thousands of speakers. The New York State movement to protect Adirondack wilderness had 200 public speakers, and the clean water and air acts of the 70's organized thousands of schools and involved tens

of millions of people. The hero of the Women's suffrage movement Inez Mulholland, in the days before airplanes, once had a schedule that had her give 30 speeches in 7 states in 16 days. And she did this while suffering from Tonsillitis.

### **Womens Suffrage Campaign**

waged in early 20<sup>th</sup> century to lobby for women's right to vote which they obtained in the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment to the US constitution in 1920. Had over 2 million members. Organized giant parades in DC with 10-20,000 women. Picketed the white house during WWI with 3000 pickets who were brutally beaten, jailed, force fed, and killed.



problem with foundations which is that their primary job is not to fund good causes but to protect their endowments. Non-profits cannot engage in direct electoral activity but most social, economic and political problems can only solved through politics - which means elections and voting. So the foundation-nonprofit system which has arisen in the past 75 years has put an end to grassroots campaigns. The one thing no foundation (except a few) will never fund is grassroots organizing but this is what all successful campaigns have utterly and completely relied upon.

### **4. Charismatic leaders**

The great grassroots movements have had charismatic leaders with a gift for organizing, Colonel Townsend for Social security, Inez Holland for suffrage, Wayne Wheeler for prohibition, Martin L King for civil rights, Paul Schaefer and John Apperson for Adirondack wilderness, and Denis Hayes for Earth Day.

### **5. Successful campaigns don't rely on foundations or non-profits**

With exceptions, nonprofits and foundations cannot win campaigns where: there is serious political resistance; underlying core issues are addressed; or powerful financial interests are involved. In most of their wins they do not really defeat their opposition or their wins are later reversed or they merely succeed in moving problems from one place to another.

Costs of successful campaigns have almost never been paid directly or indirectly by nonprofits or foundations. Mark Dowie's book "American Foundations" explains the

### **Martin Luther King's civil rights movement 1955-1965**

National grassroots organizing campaign which convinced America that Blacks should have the right to vote and segregation should be ended resulted in landmark civil rights acts of 1964 and 65.



## 6. Successful national campaigns involve or create thousands of local organizations and recruit millions of members

### **The first Earth Day 1969-70**

National mobilization of 12,000 schools and 20 million people that led to many of America's important environmental laws including the EPA and clean air and water legislation.



The campaigns to keep Adirondack wilderness from being developed involved 1000 groups just in New York State, Earth day mobilized 20,000,00 people through 12000 schools, Social Security and suffrage campaigns had millions of active members and thousands of chapters. By any conceivable measure or metric today's "organizers" wage campaigns that are perhaps 1/10 of 1% of the size, enthusiasm and effectiveness of past grassroots campaigns.

But the problems the country faces today are relatively no greater than those faced by past campaigns. Probably less. Colonel Townsend set up 7,000 individual local income security clubs and got over 2 million people to pay 25 cents a year dues to them in the midst of a depression. (About \$10 a

year in today's money). He did that in just two years when long distance calls cost real money and before photocopiers or interstates.

### **Conclusion**

Whether it is blacks voting or forever wild in the Adirondacks the only real forest protection or social progress gains that can resist efforts to reverse them are those placed into constitutions and laws by overwhelming popular grassroots demand. It is never the particular legal form that protects, but the fact that the protections or rights were created over the will of the government and business leaders by popular demand.)

Large corporations have radically changed the way grassroots are imagined, financed, organized, and managed. Successful methods from past campaigns now largely abandoned and largely forgotten have not been replaced by better methods. By any metric such as mailings sent, meetings held, organizations involved, speeches given, new local clubs or groups created or voters mobilized, past grassroots campaigns mobilized from 10 to 1000 times or more as much pressure or political action as anything attempted in the last 50 years. And these older campaigns accomplished this before email, fax, internet or the photocopier, long



### **New York Adirondack Park wilderness campaigns 1940-1970.**

To protect the park involved many statewide ballot measures where New Yorkers consistently voted to protect roadless wilderness from development. Paul Schaefer and John Apperson organized these campaigns and the young people they trained later did the campaign that created the 1964 Federal Wilderness Act

distance trips took longer, phone calls were expensive, and if you needed copies of things you used carbon paper or cut stencils and when you made a mistake composing your article, you typed the whole page over.

Today it is not surprising that we seem unable to arrive at solutions to problems even where public support of a necessary reform is universal since in today's faux "campaigns" we usually fail to use any of the tools great organizers of the past said you must always use, while simultaneously employing all the approaches they said you shouldn't.

The main effect of the new world of foundations and non-profits created in the last 40 years has been to ensure that public opinion will never be connected to grassroots organizing. And where grassroots organizing has been used in politics to generate candidate support like with Obama's first campaign they have been quickly dismantled after they have served their purpose.

From a new book in progress which is a sequel to "Organize to Win" downloadable at [Britell.com](http://Britell.com)