

Building an Environmental Movement in a Time of Crisis

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Friday, January 20 marks the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President. Republican Party staff and pundits predict that the new administration will move quickly on a wide range of fronts. Executive orders will be rescinded, the Affordable Health Care Act will be repealed, immigration policy will be redirected, steps will be taken to withdraw from the Paris Climate Change Agreement and new tax cuts will be proposed. The idea will be to use the first hundred days to launch an assault so massive as to overwhelm and trample any possible opposition. Democrats in Congress as well as progressive advocacy groups and the media will be overcome with so many rapidly fired initiatives that they will not be able to effectively counter and defend.

If the new administration can mount such a “shock and awe” strategy it should be quite effective as the administration generally controls the political field and the opposition remains fragmented and weakened. Neither the Democratic Party nor the broader progressive forces have been able to generate a clear plan of action, a common rallying call, or a solidarity coalition. In fairness the shock of the unpredicted election outcome was so dramatic that there was no default position to fall back upon.

However, there will be protests. Some are planned for Inauguration Day. The January 21 Women’s March in Washington and some 15 other cities should be spirited and impressive and, coming the day after the inauguration, they should get wide media coverage. Follow up protests and conferences in Washington and elsewhere will also help mobilize more experienced people. But, at this time, little can be done to stop the incoming administration (it will be surprising if any of the proposed cabinet appointments are derailed).

A hundred days of humiliation is not so bad, if the time can be wisely used to begin to build an effective opposition movement. Such a movement would need to be solidly-grounded, multi issue, clearly focused and strategically led. It would need to unite activists, experienced political operatives and newly empowered citizens across racial, age and class lines and it would need to be capable of exerting enough timely and well-focused pressures on administrative executives and political operatives that the risks and potential costs of their proposed actions are truly big.

Time for a Unified Environmental Movement

What is needed at this time nationally is a unified environmental opposition movement. Such a broadly constructed movement needs to serve as the vehicle for coordinating strategic lobbying, organizing mass mobilizations, unifying resistances, synchronizing and supporting campaigns and advocacy, and encouraging and supporting state, local and regional actions and initiatives. It can grow out of the thousands of existing advocacy organizations without redirecting or compromising them and it can link, if not unite, dedicated people across the social, race and economic lines that have divided us.

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Building such a large and well-ordered opposition will not be easy. The past decades have allowed the national labor, environmental, peace, women's and the older civil rights movements to grow insular and internally focused and lose the capacity for high risk, direct action. Spontaneous newer mobilizations around gender identity, race, inequality and immigration have demonstrated creativity and spirit, but significant trust and understanding gulfs separate these newer and older mobilizations. Both the Sanders campaign and the Trump victory revealed serious schisms between rural and urban voters and within the working and middle classes. The recent challenges put forth by new black activists have made race a factor no longer avoidable. The Democratic Party is sharply divided between one formalized, well-funded center/right wing and another more informal and loosely affiliated progressive wing.

However, crisis brings opportunity. Few forces are more effective at creating unity than a big, ugly, common adversary. Through his rhetoric and his cabinet selections, the in-coming president has left no progressive force un-skewed. The time is right for unified movement building. A national opposition movement could provide for resistance coordination and a common umbrella while respecting and supporting growth and regeneration within the traditional progressive movements. A common movement umbrella could visibly clarify leadership, weave together the many movement stories into a common national narrative, buttress and resource campaigns and present a bold and daunting image of power and resolve.

Consider the environmental movement. There are remarkably dedicated organizations focused on broad movement areas such as wildness (forests, animals and plants), resources (land, air and water), hazards (chemicals and wastes) and justice (race and class). There are big national organizations in Washington and thousands of regional, state and grassroots organizations and there are many linkages among them. Generally, these groups dedicate their activism to well-defined targets, but many also reach out to others in their movement area for connection and support. Advocacy organizations in some states and regions form alliances around specific targets such as water bodies, forests, land development, pipelines and fracking. Some also coordinate state lobbying efforts but usually only within their movement area.

There has been little incentive to bring the many environmental movement areas together into a more broadly cohesive and powerful national force. The country's Green Party has struggled unsuccessfully for years to ignite a more political national environmental mission. Given the predictable assault by the new administration on environmental programs and policies, many environmental advocacy organizations will hunker down to defend prized programs or historically won initiatives. Some will be successful and some will not, but more could be achieved if organizations could scale up their cross area coordination and form or join alliances that consolidate the broader environmental movement and link it to other progressive forces in a unified national opposition movement.

So it has been promising to see how the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests became a rallying point for uniting advocacy organizations across issue areas. DAPL has been successful in uniting Native advocacy groups such as the Indigenous Environmental Network and Honor the Earth with mainstream environmental groups such as the Natural Resource Defense Council and Sierra Club and newer, feistier groups including 350.org, Hip Hop Caucus, NextGen Climate Action, Black Lives Matter, Bold Nebraska and the hastily organized Veterans Stand for Standing Rock. Support rallies involving thousands of activists have been held daily at Standing Rock and periodically in cities across the country. The struggle

at Standing Rock has become not just an environmental fight over a pipeline, but a social justice campaign that has linked indigenous rights to racial justice and climate activism.

Opposition

What is needed at this time nationally is a unified opposition movement. Such a movement is different from, but supportive of a reformed Democratic Party. The Democratic Party remains critical at the federal and state levels as the vehicle for supporting electoral candidates, raising contributions and funds, maintaining party coordination, and facilitating legislative initiatives. The broader opposition movement needs to serve as the vehicle for organizing mass mobilizations, coordinating protests and resistances, synchronizing and supporting campaigns and advocacy, and encouraging and supporting state, local and regional actions and initiatives.

The opposition needs to focus on electoral, executive and legislative arenas. With such a sweeping electoral transition, it is natural to focus principally on government elections. It is critical that the Democratic Party reclaim electoral power. This means focusing on winning Democratic Party control of the Senate and winning several of the state legislatures and governorships in 2018 and certainly winning the Presidency and more state legislatures and governorships in 2020. Control of state legislatures is critical to managing the redistricting that will occur after the 2020 census. However, the opposition movement must also attend to executive initiatives. Through a wide network of existing and potentially new organizations it must monitor agency actions, sound alarms, maintain communication vehicles, coordinate targeted direct actions and punish vulnerable administrators. In addition, there are legislative initiatives that must be struggled over. The Republican-dominated Congress and various state legislatures will push new legislation to undo current progressive programs, diminish government regulations and programs and create new opportunities for public asset and service privatization. This may include a federal right to work law and state pre-emption of local and municipal policies such as minimum wage, worker rights and consumer product policies.

Tactics

An opposition movement expresses its opposition through well targeted tactics. Annie Leonard, Director of Greenpeace, argues that good tactics should stop the bad, promote the good, change the rules and rewrite defining stories. An opposition movement can do this through protest, resistance, criticism, litigation and initiative.

Protest. Massive, clearly focused and non-violent rallies and demonstrations are useful, not only to raise awareness, demonstrate scale, stir media attention and keep up spirits, but also to provide cover for private negotiations and otherwise impossible deals. Large scale gatherings particularly in Washington, but in various Republican-dominated states provide opportunities to build coalitions, practice coordination and provide emerging leaders with authority and oratory practice. There will certainly be mass protest rallies if the new administration moves to exit the Paris Climate Agreement or reopen the Keystone XL Pipeline decision and these demonstrations should be bold and confrontational.

Resistance. Resistance is the most direct tactic for stopping the bad. The new administration will move rapidly to undo many executive orders and progressive programs put in place by the last administration. Some that have direct effects on people such as Medicare, immigration, welfare assistance and health insurance will be easy to mobilize constituents around. Massive phone and internet lobbying efforts

and direct action sit-ins and protests in targeted agency offices or district meetings of legislators can be effective. *Indivisible*, the widely read manual for direct action lobbying offers a step by step guide. More diffuse initiatives that do not affect people so specifically such as tax policy changes, cuts in regulatory enforcement and special deals for privileged firms will be harder to confront with direct action confrontations.

Criticism. Print and digital media will be ripe for critical analyses, exposes, scandals, leaks and negative publicity. Mr. Trump has demonstrated with success the power of social media, but social media offers a two-way street and for every clever, media grabbing administration tweet, there can be a hundred pejorative, disparaging, mocking and challenging opposition tweets. The use of such verbal assaults is not just to maintain a fire, but to change the narratives that supports the Trump administration. By re-imagining immigrants, Muslims, black youth and women seeking abortions in positive, human terms and calling out the lies about climate change, job loss and tax rates, the authority and legitimacy of the administration can be undermined.

Litigation. The campaign demonstrated that Mr. Trump is loose with the law, comfortably offering promises and taunts that are illegal or legally hard to deliver upon. It can be expected that the administration will not be shy about skipping due process and public hearings and authorizing actions that are legally questionable. The opposition can use the courts to enforce rules by moving for injunctions, challenging actions and filing criminal charges against individuals. EarthJustice currently manages some 300 environmental lawsuits and with the huge increase in donations since the election, it is gearing up for many more.

Initiative. However, the opposition cannot afford to be only negative. The overarching narrative needs to include positive and hopeful images. If it is to keep up the spirits of its participants, win the hearts and minds of independents and the undecided, and create a movement for a better society, it needs to continue to put forth progressive policies and programs that are attractive to people. With the current Congress federal initiatives can only be symbolic, however within states (even those with Republican controlled legislatures) and local governments and within the private and civic sectors there will continue to be opportunities for fostering progressive initiatives that can mobilize people and lead to wins that create vision, excitement and hope. Policies that promote renewable energy and distributed energy generation, land conservation and safe products will continue to be attractive even across parties.

Capacity

Tactics of confrontation are not the only task of a unified opposition movement. Fund raising, staff support and participant recruitment are also critical.

Funding. For non-profit groups, donations often follow something of a countercyclical pattern--when they are in the opposition and doing worse politically, the funds come rushing in. In the month following the election, the American Civil Liberties Union received 120,000 donations totaling more than \$7.2 million, Planned Parenthood saw 128,000 people making donations, and the Sierra Club reported that it registered 9,000 new monthly donors – more than it had registered in the first 11 months of the year. Private philanthropies that have traditionally funded progressive organizations will also shift their grants to resistance and program defense, but this needs to happen quickly.

Capacity Building. Additional income permits staff hiring and development. There are hundreds of young and creative activists that have emerged out of the Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter, the Sanders campaign and more local labor, peace, environment and social justice campaigns. However, many organizations will need to develop processes for opening up staff positions and promotions for newer, younger staff. Across the progressive movements quality campaign and organizer training programs are needed to train and support activists. Shortly after the election, Michael Brune, Director of the Sierra Club promised that the organization would focus on four themes to build capacity: resist, recruit, train and sustain.

But capacity means more than staff—social media and new communication platforms are emerging as potent vehicles for mobilizing and recruiting activists. With more work on platforms, technology and data management these powerful tools could be more strategically directed to inform, direct and target coordinated and mutually reinforcing actions.

Volunteers. Thousands of people across the country volunteer for progressive organizations, however, they are seldom aggressively used. Today, thousands more would volunteer if they could figure out how to effectively contribute. The Bernie Sanders campaign demonstrated the power of engaging volunteers in empowered roles as peers of staff who can run campaigns and vastly extend the work of organizations. Mainstream environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, Audubon and National Wildlife Federation are seeing large increases in people seeking to volunteer. Even smaller groups like the Clean Water Action and Environment America have been flooded with volunteers seeking to help. Bringing an army of volunteers into the movement will require organizations to redirect some efforts to volunteer mentoring and facilitation.

Structure

The initial challenge in assembling a unified national opposition movement is to convince dedicated activists and organization directors that it is worth the effort to divert energy and time from desperately needed campaign work to building a larger movement and supporting the work of others. Efforts to understand, engage and support other organizations programs and campaigns requires thoughtful discussions and sensitive negotiations. At an “all hands on deck” time, it seems a luxury to spend hours forming alliances and connections, particularly with organizations in other movements. However, it is not necessary to consolidate linkages into formalized structures.

The Tea Party has been the Right’s model of a unified national opposition movement (an effective one), and it offers lessons here. It is a movement, not an organization. It functions as a network with shared principles and values (including a guiding document called the “Contract from America”). It is constructed upon linkages among preexisting groups across the country. Groups do not join the Tea Party or give up their existing missions, but, rather, they affiliate with the Tea Party using the common name and brand and identify their solidarity, by inserting after their name a comma and the words “Tea Party affiliate”. Synchronized and coordinated actions are not orchestrated by a central command, but through open access dialogues among many influential hubs. Groups are free to take up causes or propose and push electoral candidates even if they threaten existing Republican Party orthodoxy.

So a progressive opposition movement could likewise be composed of many hubs and spokes linked by common communications and principles. A good name would be useful as branding is important. A clear narrative needs to be developed with some kind of central position statement broad enough to serve as a comfortable umbrella. Unity would be built through hundreds of protest and resistance

actions chronicled in a central registry and jointly credited to the active organization and the broader movement. Analysis, criticism and litigation would likewise support the broader movement.

The central position statement needs to affirm principles and defend progressive programs and policies, but it also needs to include a vision for an alternative administration dedicated to a better future. Out of power European advocates often create a shadow government (“government in exile”) as just such a vehicle for preparing now for a better future. So called shadow cabinets have been a common political construct for opposition parties in the United Kingdom at least since 1960s. A shadow cabinet is composed of shadow secretaries, one designated for each of the government’s ministries. These shadow secretaries not only observe, document, publicize and criticize the on-going work of the in power cabinet secretaries, but also serve as ministers in waiting ready to take over ministry operations at the time when the opposition party reclaims the government. Similar shadow cabinets commonly appear among opposition parties in Canada, Australia and France. In Canada, the members of the shadow cabinet have titles such as Critic for the Minister of Finance and Critic for the Minister of the Environment clearly indicating their adversarial role. In Germany Willy Brandt formed a shadow cabinet in the 1960s and Angela Merkel did so when she ran for office during the mid-2000s.

Here in the United States, a shadow government or “alternative government” might be established as a direct corollary to the new Republican administration with specific individuals or organizations designated to monitor, publicize, criticize and coordinate actions at each of the federal departments and agencies. A useful model would be OMB Watch (now the Center for Effective Government), an organization that was established in 1983 to monitor and publicize the operations of the mostly secretive Executive Office of Management and Budget under the Reagan administration.

The many organizations and movement areas that currently advocate for environmental protection and justice could be coalesced into a more densely linked network organized to oppose the new administration’s destructive and weakening policies. The focus would be to resist and counter administration initiatives at the Environmental Protection Agency and relevant agencies within the Departments of Interior, Labor, Agriculture, Energy, and Commerce. Similar state networks could be built to support opposition tactics within the Republican Party controlled states. A common opposition statement could be drawn up to set forth unifying principles for a progressive government that could be an effective steward of the environment; protecting the climate, conserving and guarding the land, water and air, and assuring environmental and social justice. The *Environmental Leaders’ Statement on Civil and Human Rights, Social Justice and an Inclusive Economy*, signed in December by a cross section of 26 leaders of environmental and social justice organizations provides a good starting point.

Shadow agency monitors could be designated for each agency with the purpose of monitoring, documenting and helping to coordinate resistance actions. Social media platforms could be created for each agency to coordinate tactics and work with insurgent agency staff in alerting and informing advocacy groups. Targeted news media like *Inside EPA* and *Inside OSHA* could be expanded to assist in agency monitoring.

In terms of the broader movement structure a process needs to be created to encourage cross movement collective action and mutual aid and to link environmental advocacy actions with initiatives organized through the broader national opposition movement. The Green Group that currently serves as a periodic meeting space for information sharing, lobbying and policy coordination among the larger Washington-based organizations could be helpful here, but not as a central command center. If a broadly inclusive and social justice sensitive national environmental movement is to emerge it must be

an open access vehicle supported by grassroots and environmental justice organizations as well as well-funded national organizations.

Getting There

It is far easier to envision a unified national opposition movement than to build one. The number of potential impediments is daunting. However, it is worth noting that the Tea Party, a Right wing movement espousing individual liberty over collective action, has been successful in launching and for eight years maintaining a highly effective national opposition movement. We can and should be building a progressive opposition movement. It can grow out of the thousands of existing advocacy organizations without redirecting or compromising them and it can link, if not unite, dedicated people across the social, race and economic lines that have divided us. It is already happening; it just needs to become a more visible and central task.