Commons Conversations Podcast - Movement Success, Durability and Research with Winnifred Louis

Voiceover:

Welcome to Commons Conversations, a series of interviews with campaigners sharing their experiences and insights into activism, learning in movements, radical history and more. This episode is from our second series and was originally broadcast on Community Radio 3CR. It features a conversation between Sophie Hartley, Climate Activism Researcher with the Commons Library, and Professor Winnifred Louis, Director of the Social Change Lab the University of Queensland.

Winnifred is a social psychologist whose research interests focus on the influence of identity and norms on social decision making in context ranging from political activism to peace psychology through to health and the environment. In this conversation, she discusses findings regarding the impact of movement actions and activities along different time scales and with different audiences, as well as principles that can help campaigns to be more effective and durable.

The podcast is produced by the Commons Social Change Library, a website containing over 1,000 resources for campaigners, which can be accessed for free at commonslibrary.org. The library contains many other podcasts including other episodes in the Commons Conversation series.

Sophie:

Hi. This is Commons Conversations. I'm Sophie Hartley, Climate Activism Researcher with the Commons Social Change Library, and I'm joining you from Whadjuk Noongar boodjar today. And today, I'm here with Professor Winnifred Louis from School of Psychology at University of Queensland. Winnifred, it's so lovely to have you here with us today. Just to jump straight in; could you maybe tell us a little bit about yourself and your research and what got you interested in studying activism?

Sure, yeah. Well, I'm a Professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland, and I'm joining you now from Brisbane which is Jagera and Turrbal country. And I've been researching social change for a long time, and I'm the Director of the Social Change Lab at the University of Queensland. I've been an activist all my life, but I actually started my research – or started my school thinking that I would look at international relations because I'm very interested in peace and conflict. But of course, as you dive into it, you realise the interconnections among the different levels like domestic and international politics.

And I, to make a long story short, came to realise that humans are extremely strange people, and therefore I needed to become a psychologist to better understand what was going on with their decision making which was certainly not influenced by the

optimising of benefits and the reduction of costs which is what I had been taught in my political science courses back 40 years ago.

And so I came to McGill to do my studies and looked at English-French conflict in Quebec, and then to the University of Queensland and studied reconciliation and prejudice against the Aboriginal people, so First Nations. And then, yeah, I started to release that many of the activist tactics that I had been using for decades as an activist for peace and anti-violence and the climate and women's rights and many other causes, that actually many of them had not been tested. The evidence base was not very strong.

And so that seems like such a huge gap. It's particularly striking in climate where as you know, we've been really trying for decades to mobilise people to accept the science and to understand that we face an urgent collective threat as a species and as a planet. But actually, the way that we go about doing that is based on anecdotes and hopes. And when you look into it, the evidence of effectiveness is not always there. So I came to realise that this is an urgent area of research that could benefit activism and advocacy across every cause. I think the same probably motivated you to join the Social Change Library, right?

Sophie:

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I think, yeah, I had a similar journey starting out as an activist, and getting really interested in different social change theories and how we do what we do better, and yeah, moved into doing my PhD after that because I was just so interested in figuring that out. And then yeah, the opportunity to be a researcher with an organisation like Commons is fantastic because you're right there in the thick of it, trying to figure out some of those questions which is amazing.

Winnifred:

Yeah, I'm really proud to be a supporter of the Library, which I just think is – there is a few things that I like about it. I think the most important is, as we've been talking, that compiling and testing what works is probably a central challenge that underpins the ability of advocacy across a range of causes to effect the social change that we're trying to achieve. But the other is just the cheerful enthusiasm to draw from different disciplines and the experiences of advocates and practitioners. And I think it's very valuable work that you folks are doing.

Sophie:

Yeah, I was really interested in your research – and you mentioned it earlier – around effective activism and what is effective activism. So I'm interested if you could maybe dig into that a little bit for us. What is effective activism and how can we, as researchers, measure it and understand it better?

Winnifred:

Right, well, of course, part of what you discover when you look into effective activism is that people have conceptualised it in a bewildering variety of ways. And some of that

immediately makes sense because there's different causes and campaigns that people are active for and in. So if you're trying to secure the vote for women, there's that central policy change that you're looking for, and that's the ultimate success. But along the way, there might be different steps that you're trying to reach. So again, to make a long story short, with my colleagues Robyn Gulliver, Susilo Wibisono and Kelly Fielding, we wrote a book on the Psychology of Effective Activism.

And we argued that there's three timeframes that people need to distinguish which are just short, medium and long, because things that work in the short term often fail in the longer term. And things that are effective in the longer term sometimes have very odd or confusing effects in the short term, and different audiences and different goals. And different audiences and different goals; so the audiences are the people who are involved in the action, the people who support the cause, and the people who oppose the cause. So for example, if I set fire to something in the service of the cause, I might feel like I've achieved something important like affirming my moral values. And supporters of my cause might appreciate certain aspects of what happened, like a broader media conversation was initiated. And opponents will probably be enraged. So the effect of that action will be quite different for those audiences.

And we thought that there's two other audiences that people need to think about that maybe aren't focused on enough. One of them is the bystanders that haven't taken a position on the cause. So the effect of setting fire to something might be that bystanders become aware of the cause, but also come to think that people who support it are criminal morons. So that will be a negative impact. And then the other audience is third parties which is people that are not so much disengaged from that cause, but they have their agendas. And we include in this the media that always has an agenda of communicating the news and making a profit. And then we might have policy makers and they have an agenda of running the country or making a decision on a portfolio that they manage. So those are five audiences.

And we thought probably in terms of achieving policy change, which was what a lot of the causes that we were interested in are focused on, there's seven useful goals that you might think of as having a sequence, but also interrelationships, because the same action doesn't have the same impact for all the goals. So the first one is awareness raising, and we talked about already the idea that if you set fire to something, that might cause a media conversation that increases awareness. But the next goal is building sympathy for your cause. And you can see that it might start a media conversation that actually undermines sympathy for your cause. And the ones after that are generating intentions and action. And those four goals are collectively called mobilisation by scholars. So you want to do all four of those things to bring other people in to your movement.

But once you have people in your movement, there's still other things that need to happen. The movement isn't the end in and of itself. Often, you want policy change. So the three other goals that we thought of that are important are sustaining commitment to the movement over time and in the face of failure, because a lot of policy changes that are really important like the transition to decarbonised economy, they actually take decades. And so it's a very long term goal. And when we look at the

vote for women, for example, that struggle took centuries in the west. And in some places, it's still ongoing today.

So sustaining commitment over time and in the face of failure, and then other two that we think are important are avoiding counter-mobilisation because if your opponents come on board, we can have a scenario where, for example, we get this great policy of carbon tax, but then it's repealed because your opponents mobilise against it, and building coalitions, which is often something that people don't look at in effectiveness that actually the policy research shows is very important. So in most cases, you can't build a movement that's big enough to sway decision makers, to get to that 51% or to influence swing voters. So you end up having to draw people in that are not necessarily part of your movement, but they're willing to work with your movement to achieve goals. And usually, there's some trade off or some negotiated political process that's required.

So that's a very long answer to your question, but our model is called ABIASCA, and that's an acronym – a terrible acronym – which identifies that you need to raise awareness, build sympathy, generate intentions, turn intentions into actions, sustain your motivation over time, build coalitions and avoid counter mobilisation. And as I say, you need to think about that in relation to short, medium and long term, and for those five audiences: self, supporter, opponents, bystanders and third parties.

Sophie:

Yeah, absolutely. Look, I think us academics, we love a good long acronym. So I love it. I'm really interested in the stuff you were talking about there around bystanders. And I know this is such a hot button question for activists. But I think people would be very disappointed if I didn't dig into a little bit more, which is what really motivates people to take action if we are trying to shift some of these people into our movement? Have you found anything through your research where people are more likely to engage with a social movement?

Winnifred:

The value of distinguishing those goals is that each of the steps has its own literature. So for awareness raising, there are lots of things that we know from the opinion literature – and from a range of areas like marketing, psychology, political sciences – things like stunts and disruptive action; they do raise awareness. They do start conversations. Violating norms; people talk about that. When you look at the headlines, that's a lot of what the content of the headlines is. And then people that have awareness without sympathy – I'm aware of something, but I do not feel like that cause is something I support – that often involves a judgement of legitimacy, and a judgement of proportionality and relevance.

So if I see something and I think it is just a stunt, or it's something that I disapprove of – it's property destruction – that can be because I don't consider that legitimate. And I don't see the relevance of that action to that cause. I'm sceptical. And what we would say in psychology is that the basis for sympathy based on awareness is trust. And trust really comes from three different sources. The first is the perception that someone is

credible, and that comes from things like expertise. It can come from the logic and arguments that they use. And part of the problem with stunts is they don't have a logic, so they're not credible.

And then it can come from morality. And morality is a very subjective thing that differs in different groups. But in general, people have a view that the law of the land is the moral code. And they also have other codes that come from their politics, their religion and so on. And then there's a judgement of likeability, which can just be like, "Is this person similar to me?" because that is actually a really strong predictor of whether people like them or not. It can come from other factors. That's why some people think the use of humour is so powerful in activism because people will – they like a good laugh. And a person that has sense of humour is someone who also sometimes seems more credible.

Then if you have sympathy without intentions, so, "I support a cause but I'm not doing anything about it in my life," and the reality is we all have causes like that. We all are aware of the crying needs of the world. Many people here might be thinking of Israel and the situation with Gaza or the situation of people in aged care and they're suffering and there's not enough resources. Or you might be aware that there's starvation and famine in Africa. We all have causes that we're aware of that we're not acting on. And we have sympathy without intentions. And the reason why people don't act when they have sympathy, the two primary reasons in psychological research are control and norms. And so norms are social rules or standards and we all have informal rules about what we're responsible for; what is our lane.

So for example, a lot of us would say family first – that is our top lane – and our professional obligations. And then we have this question: what are we supposed to do with the rest of our time. So many of us feel like we should contribute to the world. Well, how should we do that? Should we do it through a church? Should we do it through a political party? Should we do it through advocacy, and for what cause? And the way that we answer that question usually depends on the norms that we have. And those social rules or standards come from identities.

So a lot of groups explicitly tell you what to do, what to focus on: focus on your family, focus on your job, focus on earning money. Those are all norms that activists don't agree to. But we might say, "Well, we should focus on the planet because it's important to us all." But those identities and norms, as I say, they come from groups that we belong to, and social networks that we belong to. So when we talk about as activists how to raise awareness, we need to do things that start conversations including using celebrities sometimes can have the same effect as a stunt. Then we need to be credible, likeable and moral. And then we need to communicate through social networks that connect with people. So we often say in psychology that it's easier to mobilise a group than a person because if you just go up to someone and say, "Look, I'd like you to contribute to community in Africa, they have famine," people will say, "No, that's not my job," or, "That's now how I do my public good for the world."

But if you go to a faith community like a church and you say, "Look, I'd like to fund raise in your church community for this African community," people will often say, "That's

fine. You can pass the hat in our church." And when you do that you might raise hundreds of dollars. What's the difference? The difference is that you are going through a group and therefore you're going through an identity and a norm that supports that action.

Now if you have intentions but don't act, so, "I must donate to Israel-Palestine, that conflict, and I'm going do something," and you don't do it, or in a more sinister case, people say they have an intention to get to net zero, while it looks like absolutely no action's been taken right? Why is that? And so there's different principles from psychology that can be useful. An important one is the concept of the SMART goal which is specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and has a timeframe. A lot of political objectives don't have those and negotiating and developing that is an important step towards achieving implementation.

The second thing though that is often missing is resources. You know you might think of time and money, so I have a vague intention to do something, but how can I make myself actually do it? Well I can pencil it into my calendar and I can set aside a budget for it. And those steps are necessary for individuals and for groups and for countries to implement the action that they want to take. In the case of some other context, you need also a social licence to take that action. And so you might have an intention to do something but you have to talk to your family, or you have to talk to your colleagues, or have to speak to the minister if you want to fund raise through this church. So that's a step in securing the social licence to take action once you have an intention.

That's mobilisation. That's a really important and comparatively well studied across multiple disciplines, sequence of goals, and yet, most activists as you know Sophie, they actually don't deconstruct it in that way. And therefore you often see a scenario where a campaign doesn't have a clear ask. It's not a SMART goal. It might be something quite vague. And then the result of the campaign is that it generates awareness and even sympathy but there is no specific intentions that come out it, and no actions. You might have a scenario where there is a clear ask but there isn't any thought to what time, what opportunity, what resource will people need to fulfil that ask. And are you putting it out in a way that people will be able to actually answer your request? So those are very serious issues for people to think about. But then in my mind even more serious are the last three.

So what often happens in activism is that things are really difficult and you experience heaps and heaps of failure. So part of what needs to happen is the management of expectations. People often when they come into a movement they are angry about something that's happening and they want it to change and change now. But it doesn't change now. And then they get depressed and then they stop acting. My favourite story on this comes from the 2003 Iraq War when a colleague and me went to the peace rallies in February 2003, and that was the biggest rallies in a generation, really. It was the biggest rally since the Vietnam War.

But unfortunately after the rallies, the Australian government declared war and there was another rally that was called the next month. And I asked my colleague would he go to it and he said, "No. I went to the first rally and it didn't work." You might think that is

a problem of expectation management. People need to know what does political change look like. How does it work? And the reality is not all activists agree on how it works and those messages are not clearly communicated. And then that leaves a gap that people can fill, like right-wing media or hostile politicians, and they can just say, "Look, this stuff is pointless and these people are frivolous and have no practical grasp of how the world works."

So that negative messaging means people drop out. So that's one problem that needs to be addressed of motivation. The other one is there's not a lot of research about what is the best form of action in a particular context to get a policy to change. If I was to summarise that huge literature in five minutes, I would say one important issue is whether the government actually supports what you are trying to do. There's many situations that are smaller where the government might not be aware that there's a problem. So if you put up a petition, "This is a problem in our area, we would like you to solve it," they will look at that and say, "Okay, thanks," and they'll try and solve it. And that especially happens if you target the decision-makers actually responsible for the decision that needs to be made.

So a question that organisers can ask themselves is: if what I wanted to change was changed, who would have made that decision? And make sure that you're targeting the right person. The other question though is what to do if they're not sympathetic, or if they're sympathetic but they don't have the social licence or the political resources to be able to do what you ask? So they might want to do what you ask in terms of their personal values. But they don't have the money or they don't have the political permission in their broader network to do what you want. And then there might be a context where the political decision maker does not actually want to do what you want. They don't agree with you.

And so those are two separate situations from that first context. There's not a lot of consensus. That there's a recipe that you can follow that can produce what you want all the time. But some general principles are that when you're trying to change the attitudes of politicians, their personal values and their personal resources; again, they sit from their group identity and the memberships that they're part of. So you're not trying to change a person in isolation. You're really thinking of the whole group.

Both for individuals and for groups, in general, we have found that it is actually not so effective to stigmatise and reject someone. So to start off and say, "You're incompetent, you're corrupt, you're stupid, you're ignorant," these are really not compelling. That's not a great way to change someone's mind. What that does is make you feel good as a person, and that's why people do it, especially when they're angry. So again, we can think about the different audiences of collective action, one of them is yourself. You can do an action and it makes you feel good and emotionally satisfied. You asserted your moral superiority and vented your negative emotions. But that might not have a good effect on all the other goals that you're trying to do.

And then looking ahead to that other one of avoiding counter mobilisation, part of what happens when you try to change someone is they think, "Are you a threat to me? Are you trying to attack my group? Are you trying to destroy what we stand for?" And if we

take the environment for example, if you look at the perceptions that some people have of an environmentalist and their relationships to mining communities and farmers, some farmers, some people perceive that there's a hostility. I just think that's unfortunate. It's not in line with the reality and the values. And of course, the many environmentalists within farming and mining coal communities are silenced by that narrative. So we need to empower and amplify voices within the people that we're trying to change, that they're trusted. We need to show respect and to amplify those voices that are going to be effective rather than standing on the outside throwing stones. I think most of us know that.

And I haven't mentioned up until now building coalitions, and that is something where there's almost no quantitative large scale research. There's a lot of anecdotes and case studies. And from the perspective of psychology, we actually are quite keen to see large scale quantitative studies because the problem with case studies is for every time that a particular strategy worked in this case study, there might be ten other cases where people tried it and it didn't work. So that's the main focus of our lab is to try and do experimental stuff.

But what I would say the principles are that are not well supported in the field, that you build coalitions through engaging people where they're at with their values and their interests, so you don't necessarily come in with a narrative about, "These are the reasons why you should do what I say based on what I care about, and based on my interests." You go in and say, "Where are you at?" or, "Based on where you're at, this is why I think you should – you would think about coming in with us." And sometimes, that involves what they call horse trading or log rolling. It's basically the idea that if I do what you want, I'm going to suffer in some way. It's going to cost me. What's in it for me? So explicitly saying, recognising some people are not motivated by a particular ecosystem, that maybe you think they should be. That's a values questions and those take generations to change or they can change through networks, and you're trying to get something done in the next two weeks.

So given that someone isn't that passionate about a particular endangered parrot or piece of grass – what are we going to do about that – you can try and have these coercive laws and that sometimes works. But sometimes people overturn those laws. So sometimes it's a matter of saying, "Look, I know it would cost you and here's what I think is fair: compensation or some sort of negotiation. So those coalition building, that requires a real intentionality and respect for where the other person is at, and going beyond where you are and your morals and your values.

Sophie:

Yeah, fantastic. I think there's so much interesting stuff to unpack there. One of the things I think keeps coming through there is the choices that activists and social change makers have to make about how they go about what they're doing. And so I'm really interested if anything has come up in the research around what makes activists gravitate towards certain tactics, and what happens when those tactics aren't effective anymore, or when they fail. How do we go about that?

Winnifred:

Yeah, well, I think again, I'm aware of some research, but I would say a useful thing for scholars to do is to add to that research because I just think we need a lot more – what my research has shown and other psychologists have shown is first that these decisions are very contested. So it's common for activist groups to have trouble coming to a consensus on what works. And then the most common thing is that the groups split or people form different groups. So in the movement, you'll have people over here doing one thing and people over here doing another. I mean, it'd be great if either of them works, and sometimes though they can negate each other.

So in some of my own work, we've found, for example, that people were more sceptical about – less willing to engage in environmental action when they were told about a movement that included both conventional actors and radical actors that are doing law breaking and property destruction and so on. There's a range of different ways that people can be radical and a lot of us have real radical goals like transforming the values system of our planet so that we're back in line with nature instead of breaching our planetary boundaries and developing a strong democracy that listens to science. Those are radical goals. I'm not talking about radical goals. I'm talking about methods that people feel like are controversial.

But there's other research that shows that there can be benefits of those radical actions. And so a common arc that we've seen and that other scholars have seen is that you start off trying to do conventional actions, and after a while, again it's those expectations. You're like, "This isn't working," or, "It's not working fast enough." So we've got to try something else. And then depending on your culture, your cultural context – and I include your activism cultural context – you might end up doing direct action or you might end up doing something like tree planting that's more palliative. It doesn't actually lead to system change but it does make you feel like you're directly doing something for the planet. Or you might end up doing something that's artistic, or turning to music and song and so on. And again, some of us would feel like that is very beautiful and worthy in its own right, although it does not address the root causes and the need for system change.

So that concept of innovation we looked at in a model called DIME, so the ideas after activism fails many people drop out, like my colleague that just wouldn't go back to the movement. Some people will innovate and that can lead you towards radicalisation. But it can also lead you to deradicalize because the most common thing – in some research here in Australia, people found that the average length of time in a violent extremist group is only two years. People will drop out because they get disillusioned because they can see it's not working either and there's backlashes that can come from it. And then the third thing is moralising and getting energisers; the renewed sense of moral urgency and trying more. And people definitely do that in the short term. But then that can lead to burnout right, and a lot of us have experienced that where it's like, "Oh, I'm just pushing and pushing so hard. It's not helping."

So what we hope for in a way is innovation towards more science-based activism, or evidence-based activism. It doesn't have to be from science. It can be from your lived experience. But looking carefully at the context and what might work in this context and what the sequence of steps is that gets us from where we are to the system change

that's needed, and trying to follow that very intentionally; no burnout, no dropout. Innovation; that's what we think is the best way.

Sophie:

Yeah, fantastic. I love what you started there with; the idea that wanting to realign with nature and those things are radical, and we consider them radical, when for many of us in the movement, we would consider that just common sense, that that is a radical position to be in, in the world that we live in today, is so funny. And I'd love to dig in, I think, to some of that climate stuff. Obviously, I'm a climate researcher, so I'm going to be a bit selfish here. So I know you've published a lot of work on the climate movement in Australia. So I'd love to hear a bit more about that. And you published a book recently called Civil Resistance Against Climate Change with Robyn Gulliver and Kelly S Fielding. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about your findings from that. What does the Australian climate movement look like? What strategies and tactics are we using? And how effective have they been?

Winnifred:

Yeah, I'd love to talk about that. And I really recommend to people who are interested that they have a look at that book by Robyn Gulliver, as well as the other one, The Psychology of Effective Activism; so rich. So an important point that we found is just that the movement is old and diverse. So the oldest group that we found that was still active – based around birds – and it was from the 1880s, and found that the movement has grown since then and it's still growing. So we found almost half the movement is involved – in conservation broadly, is looking for habitat protection, threatened species, engaging that diversity. And then new causes have – as the environmental movement has evolved over the last few years that have come in are antipollution, anti-plastic waste, and importantly, climate change.

So what we see across those movements is an incredible diversity of groups that could be brought together. A lot of them are doing activities around information sharing and socialising, film nights, leafleting, rallies. Those are important and what we found was not all of them seem to have a clear goal. So many of us have been to many meetings where we think to ourselves, "What are we doing here?" It's very early as an organisation to end up having an event and not have a clear sense of what it's for. A general categorical distinction that you could make is some of the stuff is to grow and nurture the movement. It's inward looking, informing ourselves, and some of it is to effect change in the world. And as we talked about already, those have different types of effectiveness.

My favourite finding from the Gulliver et al Civil Resistance book is that when you looked at the kinds of direct tactics that are about trying to change things and rallies and advocacy, the effectiveness is surprisingly high. So we found from the events that had a clear goal, right, which is not all the events, we found 25% of them achieved partial or full success. Now, I don't know if you're as surprised as I was by that finding. We also found – and this is just so important – that the target of the action had a huge association with the probability of success. So actions that targeted politicians on the whole were less successful. The actions that targeted companies were more successful.

And that was because we think – well one reason is that companies, they are motivated to get the heck out of politics. If they can, they will. So things like campaigns and boycotts and so on; some of those were very effective in introducing a rapid change because the companies didn't want to be involved in that political space.

And interestingly, we found that in that climate change space, campaigns that targeted finance had the highest success, at over 70%. Now, that is a wonderful statistic for people that are involved in climate action to know. And broad organisations like Market Forces and many others have targeted that. And so the idea is in order for a lot of carbon emissions to occur, they have to have money behind them to develop the industry or the infrastructure that's going to support that carbon emission. And a lot of people actually don't want their money to go towards that goal. So a lot of the campaigns that targeted banks and asked them not to be involved in that stuff, not to insure it – insurance companies – those were successful.

Now, another important principle is that effectiveness and targets changed over time. So we found when we looked in at a case study like Stop Adani, the early campaigns directly targeted Adani and asked them not to develop that mine. Then there was some very successful work around finance and then there was some less successful work targeting some infrastructure. And so when we look across time, you can see that in the same way that activists change tactics to try and find a way to make it work, sometimes the company, like Adani, they'll try and change their tactics and go to different sources to get the money that they need.

So it's not a one size fits all at all points in time. You've got to be thinking about how can we make this happen in a very intentional way. But if we look at some of those principles, right, those are great principles for us to understand. Again, not all targets are the same. And if you want to try and stop something from happening, I think a first step – by our cultural logic as well – is that you would speak directly to that person and say, "Look, can you stop doing this? Can you develop an exit plan for this?" But if they won't do it, rather than continuing to target them, how can you pivot to look at their supply chain, or their supporters, or their social licence to operate and start speaking to people about what's happening?

And I guess I would say in Australia, another thing that we saw in that book is that in terms of coalitions, it is very important to connect to and amplify the voices of the First Nation peoples, Indigenous peoples of Australia. They often have a real strong stake in what's happening, and their voices have historically not been listened to with respect, and they haven't had a great voice in decision making. And when we talk about the idea that connecting to nature is radical, that is not the case as you know in Indigenous communities where connection to country is foundational and vocal and central. And so when we look at how our society will reconnect to those values, and will reimplement them in our relationships and ways of life, part of that probably has to be about listening to and amplifying and attending to the voices of First Nation peoples.

Sophie:

Absolutely. No, it's such an important point. I think that finding that you mentioned there is just still blowing my mind a little bit where I think we're often taught as social

change makers: you target the people who have the most power, which is often the default, is the politicians and the policy makers. And from that you're saying, that's not always the most effective route to change. And I just think that's such a fascinating finding for change makers going forward to think about a bit more intentionally.

Winnifred:

Exactly. And then we can think about why, right? So again, we can distinguish the three different groups of policy makers. One group which has the power and is willing to do what they ask; they just don't know there's a problem. That's the best group to target. Maybe you need a ramp built for disability access to a community hall. People are willing to do it. They probably have the money. They haven't thought about it or made it a priority. You can target them.

But again, when we think about it and how we do that, we often need to get the petition for people in their constituency. In a way, we're already recognising there that we need to have – they need to have a social licence to act and we need to show them that they have that social licence to act by showing that people in their community support and are asking for this. But when we look at those other two groups, so the people that are – they're supportive and they're sympathetic in principle. But they have no intention of doing what you're saying.

And we need to understand why is it that they know that there's a problem and they actually agree that something should be done, but they will not do it. So some of our centre parties sometimes have – we have this perception, right. That's what's going on. And then there's another group and they know that you think there's a problem, and they know that you want something to be done. But they don't actually agree with you on the frame there. And so those are two different groups. They're much harder to address, and again, we can ask ourselves how do we pivot from beating our head against the door, or worse, standing on the outside making stigmatising moral judgements that make them feel angry and disconnected and like a backlash, or counter mobilising? How do we change them?

And so in the case of the party that's sympathetic but unwilling; as I said, the two main reasons why people have sympathy without intentions are norms and control. And part of control is social licence. So the norms are my group has a standard. My group has a position. And I'm not free to move from that. So you need to change the group to change me. If you keep trying to change me as a person, you're not going to succeed. So then we can ask ourselves: how do you change a group? And there is a literature on that, right? And then there's the question of control. So it could be like, "My group is actually on board and we have a policy, but it would cost a fortune," or, "We don't have political permission. We don't have power." Or it could be there's a key decision maker or stakeholder that says no, and we have to defer to them for some reason, like they're giving us money or we respect them as our elders or their faction leader.

And so it's really about innovation. In the same way that an ecosystem evolves in an ideal world, the activist ecosystem will evolve to look at the situation very intentionally, to identify what the problems are – there's usually not just one problem – and to evolve, to change, so that we're not just always using the same tactics. I think part of what

happens is again, it's a literature of case studies, because there has been these big comparative studies that are looking like what Robyn was able to do in that very fascinating book, Civil Resistance Against Climate Change that looked across the whole movement.

A comment I'd make: I earlier spoke about the direct action. In that canvass of the literature which included scraping tens of thousands of Facebook pages to identify tactics that people were doing, as well as looking across websites, hundreds of websites and thousands and thousands of pages, the overwhelming majority of actions that people are taking are building – working towards growing a movement and taking conventional actions like petitions, rallies, advocacy to try and pull the levers of change. So there's a lot of action that's happening. And I guess what I would say from that is that we can look at the success rates and particular targets, and maybe try and make sure we are targeting the targets that will move, because that's low hanging fruit.

And then for the targets that we're having trouble with, really thinking about why that is and how the supporters are that might be connected to by respectfully engaging them and trying to make a case that's in line with their values, whether that's economic for businesses or moral for faith communities or related to their industry's goals for agriculture and so on. And really thinking with respect; if I were in their shoes, what will it be? In ten years when they've changed, what will the story be? Why did they change; trying to think really positively about that. That person is going to be on our side in ten years or 20 years or two months. And so how will they have changed their mind? What is going to happen to make them change their mind? I can tell you when you frame it that way, very few people would think it'll be because someone shouted at them.

Sophie:

Yeah, no, that's such a good point. And I think training ourselves to think more about our opposition as our future allies is such an important skill as activists, 100%, yeah.

Winnifred:

Yeah, exactly. And we know that that's happened in the past. There's been so many different areas where it's controversial, for example, that we would've banned DDT, but we did. With the ozone layer, there was – it was a change that needed to happen. We changed the laws around chemicals, and now, those things are uncontroversial. And it's not that there's no aerosol spray and no fridge makers. So we need to consider that the future in which we will have a decarbonised economy will still have many of these companies and many of these industries as actors. So how can we help them to get where we need to go as quickly as possible? And some of that could be compensation and a just transition.

Here we're focused on the climate context, but the same is true in any area. So if we think about a situation where I saw an article that universities are still not accommodating the needs of people with disabilities, and students are still experiencing needless and preventable barriers to accessing education, even though universities have signed up to international obligations, and even though most university administrators are probably not – are very sympathetic to students wanting

to access education. So how can we get to a scenario where people have implemented that change; they understand why they should have sympathy, they've formed an intention and then they're taking concrete action. And I think we need to imagine that there's a process of mapping where we're at and where we're going to, and then trying to go step by step in that direction.

Sophie:

Yeah, absolutely. Fantastic. There's one question that I'm dying to ask you as a researcher, which is: if there was anything that you could measure or learn about the Australian climate movement that hasn't been done yet in the research, is there anything that comes to mind?

Winnifred:

Well, I'm really excited about the Movement Monitor project that you guys are doing. I mean, I know that sounds like the straight line, but I really am. I just think we talked about the idea that large-scale comparative studies are very, very important in advancing the evidence base. So the initial research is largely scattered and missing, and a lot of is descriptive case studies. And these have a valuable power. You can say we tried this and it worked in this context, but what we know is that the stories of things that didn't work are often silenced. And when people go out and try it, it turns out there was barriers that are unforeseen.

So I love the Movement Monitor project of the Commons Library. And what it's going to do, as far as I can see, is try and follow the whole climate movement and what people are trying and how they're trying to do it, and then just report back year by year on what the successes are. And I think that this data is going to allow people to understand what works in their context, for their goals that they have and the targets that they have, and allow people to really make more evidence based choices. And then when they do those choices, we'll be able to see how that flows through because we'll be able to identify what are some of the factors that enable a particular tactic to work really well in a given context. Then, what are some of the barriers that people will face? And then how did they overcome those barriers? So that iterative cycle between seeing what people are doing and seeing what worked; I think that has a great potential to contribute, not just in Australia, but around the world for the environmental movement.

Sophie:

Fantastic. Yeah, no, and obviously as the researcher on that project, I couldn't agree more. So for the listeners who haven't heard about it, the project that Winnifred was just talking about is our Movement Monitor project. So please do follow along and see what we're doing. We'll be releasing a report card in the first half of next year. So we'll be really excited to have the feedback from everyone in the climate movement. Winnifred, it has been so lovely chatting to you this morning. It's been such a – yeah, fascinating conversation with so many amazing insights. So I'm so, so grateful for you taking the time to chat to us on Commons Conversations.

Winnifred:

Yeah, I'm really excited to hear from listeners with any questions, and maybe they could them send them to you Sophie, and we could have another episode where we go through the questions, and give answers to them. Or if you guys want to directly reach out to me, you can also Google my name – it's L-O-U-I-S, Winnifred with two Ns – and directly email me. I'm happy to entertain your emails.

Sophie:

Fantastic. No, thank you so much for generosity; really appreciate it. And yeah, absolutely, if anybody has any questions, you can reach out to me at sophie@commonslibrary.org. So thank you so much.

Voiceover:

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