

UK: Lobbying politicians is holding back the climate movement

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The lobbying and state-directed demands of climate NGOs are hurting the UK's climate movement. We need to organize our struggle at a distance from the state.

In early January, Labour leader Keir Starmer [tweeted](#) about his commitment to tackling the climate emergency, sharing an image of him meeting with several climate groups. The screenshot revealed all the Zoom meeting attendees: the Queen's Council and several other Shadow Cabinet members, alongside figures from all the major wildlife and environmental charities, from Greenpeace to the WWF. The tweet showed a motley crew — a collection of old and pale smiling faces, confident in their ability to tackle the climate crisis.

The tweet was quickly ridiculed. Many from the UK Student Climate Network, the group coordinating climate strikes, pointed out the advanced age of the participants, and contrasted this with the Labor leader's refusal to meet with the student strikers. Others pointed out the audacity of a meeting on the climate crisis — which is itself a racist crisis enfolded in forms of racialized violence — comprised of only white "climate leaders." Another point was the exclusion of Labour's own climate leadership, and the Party's refusal to include the Labour for a Green New Deal coalition. The charge was clear: these people did not represent the climate movement.

This is a clear reflection of Starmer's lack of ambition on climate change, and his wider refusal to engage with grassroots groups. As [Chris Saltmarsh](#), co-founder of Labour for a Green New Deal, rightly points out, many of these NGOs backed climate targets in 2019 which were embarrassingly small in ambition, effectively excluding serious climate justice concerns. These organisations have repeatedly fallen short on issues of global justice and have been outflanked in mobilization by groups like Extinction Rebellion and the UK Student Climate Network, who take a much more ambitious stance on the need for urgent decarbonization.

Yet against many who responded to the tweet and as someone who has worked and volunteered for several climate NGOs, I am skeptical whether the inclusion of grassroots voices and organizations would be a political improvement for the climate justice movement.

The obsession to engage with elected officials that permeates many organizations — from small to big, new to established NGOs — is detrimental to the political horizon of the climate movement. Instead, the strategic focus should be on the building of alternative institutions of collective power and decision making, outside of the state.

Courting officials

Many climate groups, upon coming to maturity, moving from a protest group to a civil society organization, dedicate some of its personnel and resources to courting elected officials. For some of the bigger groups this includes overt meetings and facilitated events with politicians, often irrespective of the party. But even smaller groups often hire people or bring on volunteers whose

only role is to manage relationships with elected officials. Such work has come to be seen as an essential part of organizing for climate action: meeting with elected officials has become a criterion for both NGO success and their claims to legitimacy.

The focus of climate NGOs on lobbying politicians really hit its stride in the early 2000s, when the Conservative Party began engaging with climate NGOs in an attempt to rebrand itself as socially liberal. David Cameron even made a [trip to the Arctic](#), taking photos while hugging huskies and pointing to his environmental commitments. It was WWF-UK who facilitated the trip.

These images supported both Cameron's Tories and the Coalition government's efforts to present themselves as "the greenest government ever" — claims that were clearly proved false by 2015, as was even noted by the [head of WWF-UK](#). Unsurprisingly, few have been held accountable for this shameful example of NGO-facilitated greenwashing of the government.

Despite this, after the 2008 financial crisis and the victories for the Conservatives in both the 2010 and 2015 elections, the strategy has only become more widespread. Though groups would voice criticisms of the Conservative-led governments, the approach from many established NGOs remained conversational, the aim was to talk to and convince MPs to adopt particular policy changes — no one wanted to rock the boat and lose their access to MPs. For example, in 2020, ignoring the past ten years of climate inaction, the Climate Coalition organized "The Time is Now": a series of events where constituents came together to "have a virtual cup of tea" and lobby their respective MPs about climate change.

Such events may seem novel but they retain the same lobbyist logic: if we just meet and talk to MPs, perhaps climate action will result. This is just one example of many, especially given the turn to digital campaigning due to COVID-19. Today we see well-resourced and established NGOs spend the majority of their time bombarding supporters with petitions for their MPs, designing template letters and emails to send to the constituency office and showcasing the endorsements they receive from MPs.

Whether NGOs take our petition to MPs and beg their attention, get us to take photos outside their constituency office, or fight to attend Zoom meetings to "have a virtual cup of tea," the vision of political change underpinning it all is identical. Rather than seeking to organize and empower people, politics is reduced to convincing politicians to change their opinion on a matter.

This is a fundamentally liberal model of political change, irrespective of how "radical" the climate groups present themselves as. It assumes that elected officials operate based on opinion alone, irrespective of deeper institutional powerstructures embedded in capital and the state. Their flawed logic assumes that we just have to convince MPs that climate justice is a problem, and that the solution is simply a matter of ensuring that the people in power hold the right opinions.

The curse of lobbying

There are several effects of such an obsession with lobbying elected officials. This is not to suggest that there are not positives of lobbying. There are, of course, the short-term gains that may result, but the constant focus on seeking influence with politicians has a long-term detrimental effect on the climate justice movement. Once the board of an NGO is convinced it has the power to lobby and influence elected officials, several problems rear their head.

One of the biggest barriers to NGOs taking more overt action, or even making statements in favor of climate justice is the worry that their charity status will come into disrepute given limits on "political" actions charities can take. Within the different UK legal systems, the major benefit to

becoming a charity is tax exemptions. In return, the restrictions on political campaigning are extensive, with a very real threat of losing charitable status and massive financial loss for many charities.

Several times over the past few years, particularly during elections, I have personally witnessed projects being limited or rejected because NGOs were concerned about legal action. One fear is the British state will use charity and electoral law to subdue criticism from NGOs. But there is another, much softer way in which the government reigns in NGOs: by denying access to politicians. Once an NGO starts lobbying, the fear of losing access restricts the potential actions that environmental groups will take, and in the end their own internal politics.

The emergence of specialized staff who work as lobbyists is a major change to the internal composition of NGOs. Their job is to engage directly with politicians to advocate for particular policies or research of the NGO. There is militant apoliticism of their role — they must be able to approach and engage with as many different elected officials as possible, yet they cannot appear partisan for anything other than their cause. Openly advocating radical politics, whether socialist or anarchist, is likely to count against their ability to lobby political parties.

For new social movements, the fear of being locked out of meeting with politicians entrenches a conservative attitude. Perhaps the most notable example of this was the refusal of several environmental NGOs to commit to a net zero standard closer to 2030, despite the desire for it within groups like Extinction Rebellion and the Fridays for the Future. Such a split has further played out in the UK with XR co-founder Roger Hallam's new project, Burning Pink, vandalizing the offices of several NGOs for their inaction on climate. Conversely, Extinction Rebellion's recent targeting of right-wing national newspapers was condemned by [several NGOs](#), who accepted the established framing of it as a "free speech" issue. Once access to MPs is possible, NGOs often somersault to prove they are "the reasonable ones," as opposed to other, more radical, groups.

But perhaps most importantly, the net effect of lobbying has been the greenwashing of the government and its representatives, rather than bold and necessary action on the climate crisis. As we have seen with Cameron's trip to the arctic: close relationships between NGOs and government figures is more beneficial to the public image of the officials than it is to effective climate action.

Exiting the lobby

The decision to direct valuable resources for climate action towards lobbying politicians reinforces a conservative approach to politics among NGOs that is at odds with the struggle for climate justice. But there is hope. Regardless of the many and well-deserved critiques of Extinction Rebellion, one important initiative they have been pushing is the establishment of citizen assemblies as new decision-making bodies on climate policies. Citizen climate assemblies hold within them the kernel of a new strategic orientation for climate organizers.

Rather than continually asking politicians to take action, pushing for extra-parliamentary forms of public decision making focuses our energy on seeking power for the people rather than appealing to those in power. We accept that the failure of politicians to take decisive action is not due to them simply belonging to the wrong party or being the wrong person, but instead due to the very forces embedded within the capitalist state. The alternative is to seek to create institutions outside the state which have the legitimacy to push for action.

The problem remains that Extinction Rebellion and the different groups which compose it are still *asking* the British state to create these bodies, rather than taking the initiative themselves. This creates a space where the state can shape future climate assemblies according to its own will,

stripping them of the power to hold the government accountable and gutting the potential for true public participation.

The attempts by the state, both in France and the UK, to undermine climate assemblies and convert them into public consultation processes is a story for another day, but it shows how urgent it is for the state to control such bodies. Movements should realize the potential to organize such new bodies of public decision making, inspired by a militant climate politics, and begin the long and likely difficult road of building them. This is certainly not the easy road, but it is still much preferable to constantly pleading with politicians.

I am writing this under a pseudonym, mainly because I have, and likely will continue to work for environmental NGOs over the coming years. There are thousands of young people in a similar situation as me, who have left university to work for environmental charities and not-for-profits, hoping to have a career not premised on plunder and exploitation. We have discovered that not only do many well-resourced organizations do very little of substance, but in the worse cases these groups are a hamper on organizing, obsessed with their brand and having a seat at the table, rather than building their own.

Overall, even though our work does not directly contribute to climate breakdown, it does hamper the climate movement. Political leaders like Boris Johnson and Keir Starmer are not going to set up and take the climate action necessary for this era, yet many NGOs keep spending their time and energy petitioning them and hoping to meet. If we finally understand that they will not do what is needed most urgently right now, regardless of how much we lobby, climate movements will have to take this action themselves. This final step will likely have to be done without NGOs, and the sooner we are clear about this reality, the sooner we can start.

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