

# **REVENGE of the BEAVER**

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Building Power in the Age of the Canadian Culture War

By Matt Price  
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Five years ago I wrote a paper called *Greening the Beaver* in an attempt to inspire Canadian environmental organizations to apply what I thought at that time were some key lessons of effectiveness.

It turns out I was wrong.

It's not that I now think the lessons themselves were wrong – although I would make some shifts in emphasis – but rather that I was overly optimistic in terms of the ability of groups to embrace them, even if they wanted to. It turns out that our own inertia stands in our way as our biggest barrier, and that it is a beast with many heads.

And this is a shame, since I don't think anyone would argue that we are in a stronger position today as a community than we were five years ago. We face a federal and several provincial governments hostile to our cause, and a public that has ridden the green rollercoaster from high concern in 2007 to a nadir of engagement earlier this year. How much of this situation is our own fault makes for a great debate over beer, but is ultimately moot in the world of needing to get things done. We must simply forge ahead.

How, though? It's an old saw that a definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting different results, but it's a saw that still cuts. Are we really content with having our mission be to help things get worse more slowly, or will we take responsibility for making and executing a plan to help things get better?

This is a timely conversation, and not just because of the ecological imperatives staring us in the face. On the one hand we face the threat of newly aggressive opposition in the form of those who have chosen to import into Canada the U.S. culture war that sees 'environment' as a part of some leftist plot to take away freedom, and who have begun to attack us directly because of it.

On the other, we face the opportunity of a growing chafing against authority by those who are fed up with elected officials and businesses not taking human and environmental concerns seriously enough, manifested most visibly in direct actions and occupations of public spaces.

Organizations, whether environmental or otherwise, can sit on the sidelines while these trends play themselves out, or they can jump in and be actors and be relevant in the emerging main game. This paper advocates the latter, and picks up on *Greening the Beaver* in a more prescriptive manner that I hope is helpful not just to environmentalists, but to those working for social change of any kind.

It's time for *Revenge of the Beaver*.

Matt Price has worked for over 15 years for environmental organizations across North America. He thanks those that gave feedback to this paper – all views and any errors in this paper are his own.

## WRITE A STOP-DOING LIST

*“There are only two kinds of people in this world... those who can hurt you at home, and everybody else...”*

– CANADIAN MP CITED IN 2009  
NANOS E-POLITICS PROJECT

We are very busy, but we’re not winning. The answer cannot be to get busier still. If we want to start winning, we need to write and execute a stop-doing list so that we can spend time on a few fundamental things that do lead to winning.

*Greening the Beaver* outlined how many of us still cling to the Enlightenment ideal – if we simply keep telling the truth, we will ultimately win. This is why so many of us are still writing reports and holding press conferences, and in this modern time writing blogs, tweeting, and posting on YouTube and Facebook, all to get the truth ‘out there.’

And then what happens?

If our truth even gets noticed for more than a day in the newspaper, then some vested interest comes forward with its competing truth, accuses us of hating jobs and people, and ups its lobbying of decision makers to ensure that nothing changes. And, so long as trashing the planet remains profitable, we cannot match the advertising budgets and the lobbying budgets of those who stand in the way of change.

But, while we may be cash-poor, we have the potential to be people-rich, and another word for people is “voters,” those who ultimately control what elected decision makers do. Our challenge, though, is developing relationships consistently with enough voters such that working together we can make a decision maker understand that it is in his or her interest to act, not just because we are telling the truth, but because his or her constituents demand it.

Here’s the critical point though – the main message of this paper if you take away just one thing: this will only happen at scale and with consistency if those relationships have been deepened with face-to-face contact such that trust and common cause can be properly built. Put another way, this will not happen if we stay behind our desks in our offices.

A recent example of this can be seen not with our allies, but instead with the anti-wind forces in Ontario. They reject wholesale the Enlightenment ideal of simply telling the truth given the outright misinformation they arm themselves with on supposed health impacts. But they gain power by getting out there, putting boots on the ground and being physically in communities in order to whip up opposition by taking advantage of aesthetic objections to wind farms. The in-person nature of the campaign is what makes it powerful. It turns out that ninety percent of the battle really is about showing up.

*“The instruments of social media are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient. They are not a natural enemy of the status quo. If you are of the opinion that all the world needs is a little buffing around the edges, this should not trouble you. But if you think that there are still lunch counters out there that need integrating it ought to give you pause.”*

MALCOLM GLADWELL IN “WHY THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TWEETED”

Another example of us being out-organized is the anti-smart meter campaign in BC, again another push that runs counter to Enlightenment truth-telling. My wife was recently approached on a beach to sign a petition for them. Now, that’s commitment to getting out there. And it’s working, with BC politicians responding in their favour. Face-to-face organizing equals power. The fact that our opponents are doing more of it than us should be setting off serious alarm bells.

Required reading for anyone doing social change in the modern age is Malcolm Gladwell’s essay, *The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted*. Agree or not, you should have an opinion on it, since it will force you to examine how you do your work. The core premise is that bigger social change has historically been driven by groups of people who have the “strong ties” that come from face-to-face contact and relationship building, since they are then willing to make the bigger personal investments and risks necessary to force real change.

As you can imagine, there has been a backlash to Gladwell from those heavily invested in digital media, but the point is not that digital media isn’t an important part of social change, but rather that it is not sufficient. We must graduate from online to offline with our supporters if we want to move the needle in big ways. We must rediscover and invest heavily in old school face-to-face contact if we want to win.

After many years in this sector, though, I’m skeptical that many existing organizations will make this shift. There is a reason that most campaigns with buzz emerge from either new organizations or from in between the cracks of established groups. Our inertia is simply too great, and it usually takes either a crisis in the organization or an incredible act of will by the person(s) in charge in order to do things truly differently.

The beast of inertia has many heads:

**Comfort and Ego** - Let’s face it, for the vast majority of us, it’s more comfortable to be in the office with people we know than to have to leave it to talk to strangers. Some people have that gene that lets them draw vampire-like energy from meeting new people, but most of us don’t. And, meeting the public often means doing this outside of 9-5 and on weekends, when we have families who would like to see us, or hobbies that take place in those windows of time.

Then there’s our ego. After years doing this job, why should I be the one who needs to go talk to people? Can’t I set strategy and make plans and do higher level communications

*“If one thing is clear from the tea party movement, it is that the power of democratic engagement can have a more profound impact on the causes that grantmaking foundations and charities care about than all of their prized innovations and scaled-up programs. Yet, too many foundations seem to think that it’s impolite or anachronistic to talk about power.”*

MARK ROSENMAN, DIRECTOR,  
CARING TO CHANGE

while less senior people get out there and engage with citizens? Yet, with limited resources, there may in fact not be that many ‘junior’ people to get out there, and even if there were, it’s the ‘senior’ people who may have the passion that citizens will respond better to, as well as conveying the feeling of talking to the real movers and shakers of the organization.

**Business Models** - It sounds strange, but many of us are paid to not be effective. Our business models – and ones that can be quite comfortable – keep us busy away from the front lines where hearts and minds are won in-person, and instead mostly doing research and writing, having conferences with each other, and seeking out meetings with decision makers where we are humoured rather than respected, since we ultimately have little power.

A major reason for this is the culture of funders. Larger grants for our work come from foundations and other donors who are used to discreet funding for reports and faster ‘air war’ communications type work (like running ads), rather than face-to-face organizing. Or, their drive towards being an effective funder backfires by putting narrow criteria around specific products and issues in the name of accountability, when face-to-face organizing is usually more general, slow, and values driven. If funders really want to be effective with their money, they’d invest in longer term power building, in organizations that are physically getting out there and building their supporter base.

**Mission and Culture** - Many of us have spent hours and days working on organizational visions, mission statements, and org charts. While helpful for clarity, this can also get in the way of being effective. “It’s not what we do,” or “it’s not who we are” can be used to rebuff the most effective campaigns staring us in the face. If what we do is to make change, though, then why aren’t we more open to changing ourselves too, so that we can achieve our mission?

It’s not that research, report writing, and public education don’t have a role to play, but rather that if this constitutes the majority of the work we do as a community, then we will not get where we need to go. More of us need to make our work about organizing at the intersection of our issues and creating the pressure to make decision makers move on them, to make our community’s culture consistent with what political parties do when they are winning ground games during elections.

## THE LIST OF AWESOMENESS

So, we've heard about the stop-doing list, but what should replace it? Once capacity and energy is freed up, we need to wage more 'breakthrough' campaigns that build our power. But, what do they look like? Here is what I think are the five criteria of such campaigns, making up The List of Awesomeness:

**1. F2F.** Online tools may identify those potentially willing to take those bigger risks, but the strong ties needed to go big are forged through looking one another in the eye and building trust and common cause. Any truly effective campaign over time will therefore have face-to-face relationship building as a core element. And, for that to be meaningful, it must be two way – that is, each party must feel a sense of agency, having input and being a conscious part of the We. It must be a real relationship.

**2. Values First.** People are motivated by values, not issues. Bloodless campaigns will not bring people out to community halls at night. Peoples' values must be engaged and emotions tapped. The depth and scale of the response to your stuff will reflect the degree to which you are truly leading with values as opposed to going through the motions. And, the good thing about building relationships based on values more generally rather than issues more specifically is that those relationships will stay with you for future issues if you plan for it properly – you are building your power base for the long haul.

**3. Beautiful Back End.** An effective campaign must have a beautiful back end – that is, deep care must be taken with the logistics of collecting and databasing contacts, and an authentic follow up program that elicits deeper engagement from supporters must be resourced and implemented (this is sometimes called the "ladder" or "pyramid" of engagement). Knowing who your supporters' elected officials are is critical, so be sure to get postal codes. There is a whole other discussion paper needed to better explore beautiful back ends. For now, unfortunately, bad databases and bad follow up make up the Achilles heel of most NGO work in Canada. We have ugly back ends that desperately need a workout.

**4. Moment-Um.** Much has already been written about defining good goals, but many campaigns miss the element of having a series of key binary 'moments' in the campaign that provide the energy to build momentum. Why now? is a question that good campaigns have a good answer to – some decision or series of decisions are coming down that provide the fodder to keep supporters engaged and active. Without this, the campaign becomes too abstract and flat, and supporters switch off. Think

*Q: “So tell me, how do you go about organizing?”*

*Caesar Chavez:  
“First you talk to one person, then you talk to another.”*

*Q: “Really, how do you organize?”*

*Chavez: “First you talk to one person, then you talk to another.”*

about reading a good book – things need to happen to drive the storyline forwards. A campaign is no different. Make things happen. Tell the story.

**5. Turtle not Hare.** A victory worth having is going to take some time. Most campaigns of any significance don’t hit their stride before two years, unless a decision point is imposed before then by circumstance. So, those waging the campaign need to have the patience and capacity to dig in and push with consistency. Some would also say that going too fast, even when you can, is also not ultimately helpful since this can lead to burnout and will not provide the opportunity to bring enough people into strong tie relationships that can last a lifetime. It’s a marathon rather than a sprint.

You can recognize a breakthrough campaign, since it is one that is driving the agenda. Decision makers may have even voted the wrong way on the issue, but they are being forced to respond and to exhaust their political capital while doing so, while the good guys are building power. The U.S. Republicans have thought long-term like this for decades now, knowing that you can ‘win while losing’ if you are building power over time.

Since writing *Greening the Beaver*, one organization has begun to hit its stride and to mount campaigns that can be considered to be ‘breakthrough’ ones that are driving the agenda, even with a modest budget. The Dogwood Initiative ([dogwoodinitiative.org](http://dogwoodinitiative.org)) is based in Victoria, BC and has as its mandate to help citizens take back decision making power over air, land, and water. I’ve no affiliation with Dogwood as I sing its praises here.

What is starting to set Dogwood apart is its focus on in-person contact, not just between citizens and members of the organization, but also creating opportunities for like-minded people to meet up with one another to deepen their engagement with the cause.

A seemingly small thing with a big impact is that every staff member of Dogwood (no exceptions) must spend time talking to members of the public, whether it’s making thank you calls to donors, staffing tables at events, or door knocking during campaigns. This not only increases Dogwood’s number of face-to-face relationships, but also creates instant feedback loops with staff members who are then more aware of where citizens are at and what their desires are. The organization hardwires having its ear to the ground.

Another rule at Dogwood is that nothing leaves the office without testing. As its beautiful back end continues to evolve, testing and data are becoming core to Dogwood’s culture.

Email alerts, fundraising letters, web buttons are mocked up in competing versions and piloted before proceeding with the one with the best result. As a result, Dogwood has built itself a loyal list of almost 100,000 supporters, and its response rate from supporters is usually double, and sometimes triple that of other environmental groups. At this point in time, the Dogwood Initiative is the most powerful non-governmental organization of any kind on Southern Vancouver Island, and is growing.

Dogwood succeeds when it puts these things together – its focus on face-to-face work coupled with its obsession with testing and on engaging its supporter base have led to big numbers and real world outcomes. It has staged numerous events opposing new oil tanker traffic along the BC coast and successfully turned this into a voting issue in the 2011 federal election by working intensively on the ground. It recently prevailed on a local development proposal that would have brought urban sprawl to an area West of Victoria after engaging thousands of Victoria area citizens to both make their voices heard and to physically show up in front of local politicians. Note the emphasis on in-person work and on manifesting its power directly to decision makers.

While being regionally based like Dogwood lends itself well to strong face-to-face organizing, another organization that deserves studying for forging effective campaign innovation is LeadNow ([leadnow.ca](http://leadnow.ca)), a new national organization that works on democracy and progressive issues. In particular, LeadNow began explicitly with a values survey to identify a core community of supporters who are activated on a range of issues, from the federal crime bill to coal plants. LeadNow works to engage this community offline through putting its supporters together in local meet-ups. Its focus on values gives LeadNow a potential supporter base at least an order of magnitude greater than issue driven groups. LeadNow has quickly built a list of 75,000 people using limited resources, and continues to grow.

We could replicate and scale up the kind of work that these organizations are doing if we shift time, resources, and people away from many of the activities we are currently undertaking that are not driving the agenda. To get there, though, we need the somewhat radical therapy of having a robust stop-doing list that we need to be disciplined about following so that we can begin to do other, more powerful things that lead to winning.

## CONCLUSION: WINNING THE CULTURE WAR

*“Canada’s  
environmental  
extremists might not  
be working directly  
for Sheik Al-Waleed,  
but they’re doing his  
bidding.”*

– EZRA LEVANT

Being so close to the United States means that Canada is heavily influenced by American debates. Unfortunately, some in Canada are now choosing to import the U.S. “culture war” – the practice of categorizing issues as living within two irreconcilable ideological world views (good vs. evil), and seeking to destroy opponents rather than respecting differences of opinion.

Despite a rich history of Republican progress on the environment (e.g., national parks, clean air and water legislation), the U.S. right wing has now entirely disowned the issue, seeing green issues as part and parcel of a leftist plot to take away freedom. It likely hasn’t helped to have former Democratic Vice President Al Gore branded as Mr. Climate Change, but wealthy fossil fuel interests like the Koch brothers have also actively funded campaigns to discredit environmental issues and environmental groups.

In Canada some are now adopting wholesale the language and tactics of the U.S. culture war. Ezra Levant, for example, would like nothing more than to be Canada’s Glen Beck, resorting to ever more inflammatory name calling and buffoonery in a desperate attempt to attract attention to himself (such as chain sawing a potted plant on Earth Day). Levant’s schtick doesn’t work without enemies, though, and environmentalists frequently serve as a favourite target.

An anti-environment echo chamber has been established across the Postmedia and Sun chains of newspapers, joined now also by Sun TV, Canada’s answer to Fox News. You can now reliably find a piece every day attacking environmental policy or environmentalists themselves. A favoured tactic is to seek to discredit environmental groups by attacking their funding if it comes from non-Canadian sources, of course neglecting to comment on the fact that multinational corporations spend far more time and money lobbying in provincial capitals and in Ottawa.

What to do? The situation presents a bit of a Catch 22 to environmental groups, since by responding we are then in their message frame, with our credibility in the window rather than the issues themselves. This is exactly the intention. At the same time, by not responding, we leave the field clear and embolden unsympathetic politicians to pick up and amplify the anti-environmental arguments. Indeed, we are seeing this now in Ottawa.

*“I hate drum circles,  
but I hate corporate  
greed more.”*

– OCCUPY WALL STREET SIGN

Unsurprisingly, my answer is the same as it is elsewhere in this paper – we need to respond by getting out there and winning hearts and minds in-person, and to do it at enough scale that we render culture war tactics irrelevant as having no political profit, and even political liability. Yes, we must assertively respond to attacks – and preferably with some libel suits to put our name-calling opponents on notice – but we cannot be distracted from doing the work of building power.

And, a good thing about face-to-face organizing is that over time it pays for itself, since the strong tie relationships we build are the foundation of successful grassroots fundraising. We are not only building a political power base, but also a donor base. Our business model then aligns with our strength – strong relationships that we can call on for change.

We didn’t start the culture war, but we’re in it now, and this is how we win it.

Now is a great time to make the shift envisioned in this paper, since there’s a real sense out there with the public that things are broken. The Occupy protests touched a nerve about equity and democracy that went far beyond those camping in the tents. Parents are anxious about what climate change means for their kids now that Ottawa’s inaction has been laid bare. There is a growing sense that those in charge aren’t acting in the public interest. This is fertile ground for us.

If we are to break through at scale, though, not only do enough of us individuals need to move into the work of face-to-face organizing, but we also need to link up as we do it. A smaller regional organization can be influential with local decision makers, but can begin to be provincially or nationally relevant as part of a network of organizations that are doing similar work elsewhere.

In that kind of federated organizing lies the power to put Canada on a better pathway. Local, regional, and national organizations all focusing on in-person organizing, engaging citizens and building lists and relationships that are activated to move decision makers, and then stitching this together across the country – this is what will lead to real change.

This is how we will achieve *Revenge of the Beaver*.