

Whatever happened to the BIG push? Comments on building resilient organizations

I have lately had some materials sent to me relating to the "BIG push" event in Burlington a couple of years back. We do not hear much about this BIG push any more and it is worth considering why.

The BIEN report on the BIG push progress is attached. So is Robyn's report on the Burlington meeting. She also had a contact list of people who were at the meeting. I never heard about it until after it had happened.

Initiatives of one single person usually do not go anywhere, especially when they are about trying to create a job or even a personal empire. In the world of social activism and movement building, there are always a lot of people like that. Despite their great energy and often personal magnetism they always do more harm than good. It is better to discourage such people.

National Anti-Poverty Organization

I first encountered Rainer when he was still working in Toronto. He helped a bit with an event I put together about Citizen's Income, as we were calling it at the time. He did not seem to want to become closely involved in this group, which soon broke up anyway. About that time he left for Ottawa.

When I next heard of him he had become executive director or similar title to the National Anti-Poverty Organization. I had been acquainted with this outfit for some time. It had existed since the seventies but was having a hard time surviving and finding any real purpose.

I was still living in Calgary about 1993 when a friend I was working with at the time asked me to be a delegate to a special NAPO conference. This was called to discuss a new financial plan for the organization. This was when the anti poverty movement in Calgary was being seriously harassed and broken up.

Clive was becoming depressed. He could not go himself and could no longer find anyone but me to send to this conference. I was not the best choice. I had one week's notice and I had just had facial surgery with my jaw wired shut. I was still very zonked from the anesthetic.

Clive talked about how the only organizations advocating for social programs were groups started in the seventies. It would be impossible to get something like NAPO started today; I mean in 1993. Most groups had a hard time funding themselves and were more focused on keeping their heads down.

The directors of NAPO had come up with a financing plan that involved focussing on building up a funding base so that it did not have to keep depending on government and foundation funds. This seemed reasonably sane to me, as long as at the end of building up the base, NAPO got down to business.

Alas, I could not participate well in the conference. I was too zonked out by general anesthetic hangover. I missed most of it because I could not get woken up until mid morning and then I could not find out where things were being held. This was at the University of Ottawa, by the way.

I was and still am very annoyed about the way I was treated by people. I could not get any assistance from anyone and was treated like a mental patient who got into the conference by mistake. I first met John Clarke of OCAP while there; or rather, got a blank stare from him when I tried introducing myself.

It wasn't much of a trip. I even missed the flight home and had to negotiate with Air Canada to get on a later one. However, as my head cleared and I got into contact with some people at NAPO HQ in Ottawa, they were somewhat apologetic about all this.

Canada Assistance Plan

I was even being considered as a regular delegate to NAPO from Alberta. However, I had come to the conclusion that I absolutely had to get out of Alberta. The NAPO conference happened over voting day for the 1993 elections, causing me to miss voting. The new Cretien, er, Chretien regime wasted no time in wiping out the Canada Assistance Plan.

The CAP had been in place since 1965, requiring provinces to provide social assistance based on the fact, not the cause, of need. I had that line well learned when I was fighting the vicious lunatics of the Alberta social services for the right to exist and obtain medical care. Chretien swept CAP away with almost no opposition from all these supposed anti-poverty groups. It was about three quarters of the way to a Basic Income.

I knew that when CAP went it would be a massacre in Alberta and it was. The only thing that moderated it was when British Columbia became swamped with refugees from Alberta and protested. I had obtained a disability benefit by that time, however I made plans to move too, though in another direction.

I got good advice from my friends at NAPO HQ. Go to Ottawa, Toronto, or Kitchener Waterloo. Stay out of Hastings county, Ontario. At the time, housing was reasonably available in Toronto and I stayed. However, as I struggled to get established here I lost track of NAPO for awhile.

Canada Without Poverty

When I started trying to reconnect with NAPO, all the people I knew had left, and I had trouble establishing contact with the new people. I did not know if the funding base program was a success or not. A few more years on, and I called the NAPO office in Ottawa and was amazed to find the phone answered by a notorious poverty pimp type from Toronto.

Shortly after that, it seemed like NAPO had collapsed. By that time, I had a good idea of why. Its structure made it vulnerable to take overs by opportunists, if one could get a job on the staff. The board were spread all across the country, and were mostly poorly trained "experience of poverty" folks like me.

I am not sure just how it went down, but it seems a troll got a foot in the door, moved his/her buddies in, scooped the funds from this "funder base", and when it dried up, moved on. That is what poverty pimps do. I wrote off NAPO as another poverty organization that was not able to survive in the neo-liberal environment.

Lo, a bit later Rainer called me up. He wanted me to come to Ottawa because he was putting together a conference to talk about reviving NAPO. I was suspicious about Rainer but very curious, and it was a free trip to Ottawa.

I was not pleased to find that I was dragged up there in mid winter for no apparent reason other than to be a backdrop to a press conference. There was no meeting; Rainer had just decided on his own to change the whole structure of NAPO, and the name to "Canada Without Poverty".

Someone I was working with in Toronto went up to Ottawa to help the new CWP reorganize all the old NAPO files. He was amazed to find that NAPOs main purpose in the 1970s had been to push for a "Mincome" as they were calling then what is being called now Basic Income.

I had a chance to be in Ottawa again and I dropped into the office of NAPO cum CWP. My freind and some people from the religious antipoverty organizations were working there. Rainer was nowhere to be found. They admitted that CWP was having some financial problems which they were trying to overcome.

They were amazed at what they were finding in the old NAPO records about previous movements for a BI. It seems even Henry Ford liked the idea. I tried finding out something of what had gone wrong with old NAPO, but they did not want to talk about that.

Basic Income Canada Network and the BIG push

The people then working for CWP were keen on BI. One of them organized the new Basic Income Canada Network congress in Toronto in 2012. This was a joint congress with the American BIG (Basic Income Guarantee). It seems BIG had decided to hold a big organizing push, to build a member base. This push seems to have

attracted mostly libertarian types who have pushed the U.S. movement in a rightward direction.

However, this is where Rainer got his idea of a BIG push. At the next BICN congress, in Montreal in 2014, the space in the agenda where we wanted an open discussion about the direction of the Canadian movement was crowded out by the BIG mouth with the BIG push. His plans did not seem to me to be very practical but I cannot recall details.

Shortly after the BIG meeting in Burlington, Rainer got a job with the Green party for eight months. He decided to put the PUSH on hold while he went to make some money. The last I heard he was still working for the Green party and the PUSH had fizzled.

My informant who attended the Burlington meeting got calls for some time after from people wanting to know what happened to the BIG push. Some of the people who were there have now gone on to start BI groups in small cities of Ontario. It is a concern that many of them have a shaky understanding of the basic concepts of Basic Income.

There is no mention anymore of 'BIG push' on the BICN web site. CWP seems to have revived sufficiently to start a law suit with the federal government over the "ten percent" rule for charity organizations. That is, if they want donors who can claim a tax write off, no more than one tenth of their income must be spent on political activity.

I recall that the idea behind old NAPO's finance plan was to find donors who did not need charity receipts, so that they were not restricted in their activities. Many advocacy organizations and their donors these days are asking why they need these charity receipts, which so restrict their action, and just give to what they support.

the seven "C"s

The moral of this story? If you are going to be an organization disposing of substantial funds, and with a political goal which might be a threat to power, you are likely to be a target for takeover or takedown. I wrote a piece awhile back about the "seven cs" which must be navigated if you are going to reach your destination.

The "C"s are; creeps, crazies, criminals, cops, cadres, careerists, and the worst "C" of all, the one which generally gives the others the opportunity they need; codependants. There is an endless supply of nut cases out there, and people who just get a kick out of gaming other people. A board of naive do gooders with control of some money is a dream for con artists and there still some who specialize in hijacking such boards.

Some very political groups get looked into by the civil police forces, but there are private police groups too. Some of them are actually vigilantes, others just protecting special interests; for example resource companies sending agents into

environmental groups. You never take anyone at face value when real money and power are involved.

There are various political parties, mostly of the left, whose idea of building their support base involves taking over community organizations and their resources. It is not just revolutionaries; the NDP is hated in poor neighborhoods and those in certain issue categories because of their aggressive cadres and their idea that they "own" everything "left".

Careerists are those who are trying to make a job or career for themselves. It seems Rainer lost most of his interest in Basic Income when it became clear that raising \$300 000 to 'push big' was not going to happen. I suspect he also found out that the NDP cadres had already stripped NAPO by time he got there. CWP proved not to be Rainer's golden future either. It is good that he seems to be doing well in the Green party; he will be less disruptive of smaller organizations.

stabilizing principles

The moral within the moral? If you are going to build a social movement to fight for something like a Basic Income, you need to hold to three principles. They will keep you on course and able to defend against takeovers. The first is that by the time you are asking people for money looking for politicians to talk to, the debates should be over and you should know what you are for.

The second, build slowly and systematically, bringing in new people only when they understand what the organization is for. Third, understand the importance of structure and process within a collaborative effort.

These are hard concepts for most people born in Canada post about 1950, who for various reasons tend to have the idea that things should just sort of happen organically. Or, that some great leader is supposed to emerge and tell everyone what to do. I believe that is why social organizations have become so ineffective in Canada, especially since about 1980.

These cultural barriers are at least partly created on purpose by elites for purposes of mass control. They will have to be overcome if we are going to build a better future with ideas like a Basic Income.