

Democracy Hubs

So you're frustrated by politics and you want to do something?

Here's how...

A step-by-step guide to making a difference in five parts



Part 2 - **Decide Your Focus** (and then concentrate on it)

Local or national?

Your fervent wish may be to replace the government, but you live in rural Norfolk or a little market town. How on earth are you going to do it from there? What big red shiny influence button can you press in deepest rural Herefordshire that will make Johnson jump in Downing Street? There isn't one, of course, there are too many filters between him and you. But you can begin building towards it, as long as you start local.

Find a serious way to put your local MP under pressure, so he or she has to ask what's more important: keeping the party whips happy or keeping the seat? Co-ordinate with others locally and then across the country. This is the Reboot strategy. One village up in arms might be just a few hundred people, but several villages beating the same drum puts the local Tory councillor in

jeopardy and makes the MP sit up and take notice. And rebellious MPs put pressure on the government.

But we'll come to the details later. The point is, whatever project you have and whether its goal is local or national, unless you can explain to yourself how (in easy stages) you're going to succeed, then you're probably not. And if you do want to undermine the government then your best way to do it is still local, where you really can have influence and where the government is vulnerable.

The government is vulnerable because the closer to home you're working, the closer you are to your target, the easier it is to protect the integrity of your own message and the more difficult it is for the politician or CEO of some shapeless corporation to lie to you.

When you make a statement to a meeting or the local press, it's much more difficult for opponents to misrepresent you if they too are local. There isn't the space. There aren't enough filters for them to get away with it. So, your message is much more likely not to be twisted.

Likewise, Johnson can tell all the lies he wants at PMQs, because there is no realistic means of challenging him at the time. It's those filters again. He can lie to journalists because, unless the hack picks him up on it immediately, there's too much rigmarole between him and where he said it and anybody who wants to challenge it. But he couldn't do that if he were face-to-face with you. You'd know he was lying; he would know you know, and it wouldn't work.

But you won't be arguing with Johnson, of course. You'll be taking on local politicians. Most of them will only have the haziest notion of the subject as they're not used to being challenged. So challenge them. Embarrass them. Show them up. Or if a large corporation with a glossy HQ in west London is behaving arrogantly, they won't be remotely pleased if you turn up at their regional office with a few vocal supporters and a local reporter in tow.

So, keeping it local means you can control the message and control the narrative. Nationally, at the moment the narrative is almost entirely written by the government and the opposition is splintered and has no coherent story to tell that can replace it. And we won't be able to influence the government until we find a way of seizing the narrative. (Step forward Marcus Latchford. A footballer, already newsworthy, shows he has political nous too, and now controls the narrative on school meals. He is the one with the strong story to tell, and the government has no answer.)

Finding support

Most people aren't interested in politics, or so they say. Most can recognize the prime minister and one or two of his or her most colourful ministers, and perhaps

the leader of the opposition. That's about it. But on the other hand, most people are interested in the state of the local GP surgery or hospital A&E. Or whether the local school has enough computers or plans to build new houses on the field down the road or destroy countryside for a bypass.

Those are political too, but not in the abstract. People respond to how they and their family are affected by what's going on in their street, their neighbourhood. Newspapers recognize this. If there is a pub fire then the headline won't read 'Pub Fire in Framlingham', because if you live more than a few miles away from Framlingham you won't give a monkeys. Instead, the headline will read: 'Fire in Town Centre Pub', so you read on to find out which town centre and if it's your boozier just down the road. They don't even give the location in the opening paragraph either. You have to read on.

So don't expect the public to become impassioned about something that doesn't directly affect them. But almost all issues have a local resonance if you present them in the right way. If you want to get rid of your MP, look for the ways he or she has failed your village or neighbourhood, the refusals to address public concerns. Find one that particularly exercises people and start there, Little Gribbings v. the Hon. Gerard Poynton MP, about concreting over that little meadow to make a Brexit lorry park. You want to make it something that will turn them out to a meeting on a wet night.

Which brings us immediately to the state of our political parties. They do still expect people to come out on wet nights, to sit in a draughty hall on uncomfortable seats while a po-faced party creature reads out the minutes and asks for proposals. The catastrophic ineptitude of the parties is what has crushed the life out of our politics. A friend who had spent almost his entire career as a party agent remarked to me: 'In all those years, I've never called somebody to tell them that evening's meeting is cancelled without hearing relief in their voice'.

So (post-Covid) hold meetings when you have to, but preferably in pubs or somebody's house, with refreshments, and above all make them fun. Politics shouldn't be boring. After all, it can be about the things that people most care about. It can also provide wonderful bonhomie and companionship. Some of the best evenings of my life have been in a pub after a couple of hours' canvassing, when things are going well. And people will go home feeling good about themselves if you have explained to them how it will work and how they personally can make a difference.

So, make sure it's fun, and make sure people feel empowered.

Own the narrative

All stories by definition have narrative. And you have to understand it before you can begin to control it and hope to change it. Where has this story begun, how, and who is responsible for it? Ask yourself how this story came to be in the public domain. In whose interest, is it? Who has become involved? By charting its progress and identifying where and why it began you can probably get an idea of where it's likely to go next.

Journalists often have a herd instinct: they are all trying to follow the narrative too, so they all tend to look in the direction they expect the narrative and so the news to go. So, standing at the back of the crowd and shouting to gain their attention doesn't work. Nobody is listening. You have to step out to the front, on stage where the attention is, with something new and preferably sensational to add; and once you have their attention you can draw them over to where you want them to give their attention.

All news stories begin with the words: 'In a shock move today...' unless there is a good reason why they can't. There is almost always a good reason why they can't, of course, but it's a good principle. When you're looking to control the narrative, try to make your story as immediate and as engrossing as possible.

You can't tell journalists what to write or report. You must understand what they want to write and then be there to provide it for them, but on your own terms and with your own angle. Then you can begin to steer it where you want to go. Controlling the narrative is so important.

To win you must exert pressure

Though we are all probably nice law-abiding citizens who wouldn't dream of stooping to violence, that shouldn't be confused with remaining ineffectual. To win you need to exert pressure on somebody, and that means metaphorically standing eyeball-to-eyeball and declaring: 'Come on if you think you're hard enough' and waiting for them to blink.

Somebody somewhere has the responsibility for doing whatever it is you don't want done, or not doing whatever it is you're so keen to achieve. It might be a cabinet minister, or a portfolio holder on the county council, or the marketing manager of a building company. You have to decide who that is, and you have to get to him or her quickly. It's much easier to change somebody's mind when they haven't really held any strong feelings about it and have yet to make their views known. It's much more difficult when policy has been announced, positions have become entrenched, and whoever is making the decision will look a fool if he's seen to change his mind.

But decisions will almost always be made in the direction of least resistance. Your task is to make it clear that to decide on any other course except the one you're advocating will lead to unimaginable grief and ordure piled on them from on high, untold complications, extra work and embarrassment. So the pressure you and your group exert must be perceived by the decision maker as being the most compelling, and he must realize it as soon as possible, before he begins to put together his case for doing the opposite.

And as any negotiator will tell you, leave your opponents a way out. (This is part of the discipline of wanting to win rather than make a noise. If humiliation is the corollary to agreeing to what you want, they dig in and you lose.) Don't rub your opponents' noses in it – at least, not until the deal is signed. Any negotiator will tell you the other party must be able to walk away from the table with *something*. Ridiculing your opponents was never your goal: it was saving that ancient woodland.

Influence

So, imagine that in any political activity there is a big red shiny button marked 'influence'. Press that and you win. But in the absence of that convenient button, you have to produce something that will have a similar effect. How would that big red button work? How would it bring pressure to bear on the person or group responsible? What influence can you bring to bear that's going to make your target think twice?

It's important to be realistic here. 'If we do this, he's *bound* to...' isn't good enough, because he won't. That's complacent. That's a cop-out, just making a noise. You need to be able to explain to yourself and your group how step-by-step you can put together a plan which will manoeuvre your decision maker into a position where he realizes your position is best, or that refusing your position is going to land him deep in the ordure. Either will do.

So you need to be able to identify and recognize the pressure points. These will involve people you'll need on your way to influencing that decision, so they become your target audiences. If the decision maker is the chair of a council committee, find out who the other members are and research their backgrounds and opinions. Search the local press. Look at the political balance of the committee and see how many members you will need to persuade. Get to the detail, that's where you'll find your ammunition.

When you know who you need to influence, how to do it – and (importantly) in what order - call them. Local councillors get calls from the public, of course, but if yours gets two or three on the same subject then he takes notice. He begins making calls of his own, to colleagues. If he gets half a dozen calls in a day on your project it would be at the top of his priority list.

It's quite likely the first response will be complacent, 'Leave it with me', or just condescending. Don't accept either. If he says he'll call you back, you want to know when. Chase him up. If he's being difficult, call him when he's just got up, or about to drink his late-night cocoa, or halfway through dinner. Leave a message with his staff so they approach him with it as soon as he arrives at the office. Make it clear you're serious and you won't put off.

At some point as you're pressing him for action he may well plead: 'Be reasonable!'. Don't be. Only in Britain could a request not to cause some minor embarrassment to a local official be considered a justifiable reason to abandon your principles. 'Be reasonable' is really a plea for you to agree with him, to understand his problems. It's not an offer to understand yours. Being reasonable means leaving it with him, letting it slide, letting him get away with it. He wins, you lose. Being reasonable means going along with things in the way they've always been done. But that's just what you're challenging. Your job and that of your group is to be unreasonable. (But in the nicest possible way, of course.)

That doesn't mean becoming abusive. It means your group has agreed on its goals and they are your priority, not whatever his motivations are. You are expressing your democratic right. Insist on what you want and don't blink.

Don't forget, you're aiming at the decision maker, or the people who influence the decision maker. They are important too because they in turn have influence. Whoever you're aiming at, look in turn at the people or groups who influence *them* - their neighbours, perhaps, their professional colleagues, the local party. If there aren't enough influencers to get at him then you set up a couple of new ones of your own.

Is it about razing a favourite local coppice for housing or an approach road? If there isn't already a Save Beechcombe Wood pressure group then there ought to be, so you set one up. They immediately become influencers and popular with journalists, because they scent news. Our man in the hot seat only knows there is this local pressure group which is after his blood and is getting quoted in the local paper. He doesn't know it's you and your other half and a couple of blokes at the pub. All he sees is potentially angry voters, his voters, and that will make him uncomfortable. Then bring in an engineer who'll say the plan will never work.

The idea is not only to call into question the rightness of his argument and his competence in dealing with it, but to make more work for your opponents. Lots of it. And trouble down the line. Bring in somebody who can make justifiable claims about this spot being home to newts or bats or rare butterflies, and already our committee chair is hard up against it. That probably means making an application to Natural England or somebody, with all those delays and extra costs and, of course, the possibility that the council will lose.

The press is on to it. More people become angry and write to the local paper. And our committee chair finds his colleagues on the council are asking what the hell he's doing stirring up all this mud.

Local authorities are used to doing stuff as they please, without much scrutiny. The glare of public attention makes them squeamish, and it's considered bad form for politicians to bring down opprobrium on themselves, because inevitably their colleagues get splashed with it too.

If you sit down with a couple of colleagues, you can map out that whole scenario. Do it.