

Climate Camp 2009

Once upon a time, all the way back in climate activism history, all the way back in January 2006, there was a meeting.

The meeting was called by activists committed to using non-violent direct action (NVDA) who wondered why there wasn't more NVDA happening on the issue of climate change (as compared to the recent G8 summit in Gleneagles, frinstance).

So for a day, in Manchester, people talked about how there'd be a "Camp for Climate Action" in late August- at an as-yet-decided location. There were several goals, but the agreed long-term goal (as this writer remembers) was that the Camp was to be instrumental in kick-starting a serious increase in NVDA targeted on climate change.

And so the dedicated camp-osinos started working in various groups like Networking and Outreach, Site Practicalities, Facilitation, Workshops. Some poor souls were in several.

In February and March the whole movement met for two weekends. And in April, in Leeds, some started to talk formally about what might happen *beyond* August.

Some thought there was a danger was the camp would be a 'success' and that we would get into the habit of repeating the camp; partly cos it was most fun, partly cos it was the most concrete thing we would be able to think of doing, *regardless* of whether it would meet the strategic goals.

These "outcomes" discussions took place in April, May, June and July. Few participated consistently- partly because they weren't always well-facilitated, or they seemed too abstract. And there were ALWAYS more urgent pressing issues to be decided (such is the nature of organising Big Camps).

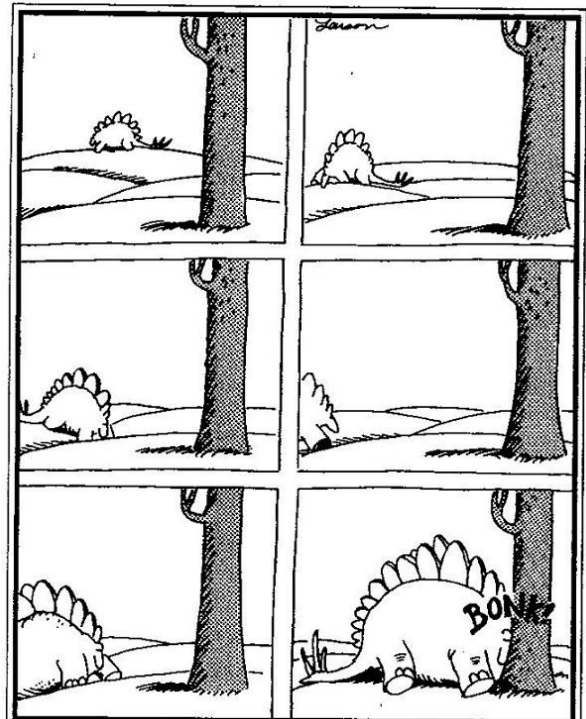
And in August the Camp happened at Drax, a brilliantly chosen and taken site. Except for numbers (lower than hoped) everything else- the organisation, the vibe, the media coverage- went brilliantly.

In October 2006 at the post-camp meeting, (by coincidence at the same Manchester venue), there was an appalling process at which- with no open discussion and teasing out of the dangers and alternatives- we "decided" to do another national camp in 2007.

And then the momentum of Another Camp (Heathrow- and the tensions that brought) rolled on...

And then through the end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008 the question didn't anymore seem (from the outside) to be "*how do we increase the amount of non-violent direct action on climate change in the UK and is a national camp really the best way to do it?*" but "*which gang's argument will win the day- biofuels or coal?*"

And now, in May 2008, to this relatively well-plugged-in outsider, there seems to be very very little grass-roots build-up for the Camp. And even less NVDA, outside the already pre-2006 centres of Nottingham, Leeds, Bristol and London. There are not, as best as a close reading of Rising Tide and Indymedia would suggest, an upsurge of activism in towns that few of us could point to on a map.



And so with the latest Camp less than 100 days away, what are the best and worst case scenarios?

The best case scenario isn't that best, and the worst might turn out to be- as the cliché goes- a blessing in disguise.

The best case scenario- in the viewpoint of the activists doubtless pouring buckets of blood sweat and tears into the event- is

- that the police are outwitted when they try to block the Camp set-up
- the media is “on-side” (or at least don't print the same shitty smears as the Evening Standard did last year)
- and that numbers of punters are up from last year's 1500 (press consensus figure- the highest I've seen is 2000, from the Camp itself).

The worst case scenario is that

- the police are able to deploy their logistical capabilities well enough to stop/disrupt,
- that EON's PR folks are smarter than whoever in BAA made the decision to injunct Airportwatch and Plane Stupid (actually, it would be harder to be stupider than the BAA buffoons),
- that the numbers of real people down and
- the numbers of tedious paper-sellers and ideology-spouters are up.

The reality will probably be some messy-mix of the above two extremes.

But the best case isn't necessarily that best. In the absence of real networking and outreach, explaining to ordinary people 'why NVDA', and why it matters, via countless public meetings across the country before and immediately *after* the camp, road shows, snappy youtube videos, songs, graffiti, stickers, call-ins to radio shows etc. etc., then the media will be able to ignore the context of the story, or simply big up one random moment of violence (which undercover cops will supply if no protester obliges). It probably doesn't help that the Olympics are happening simultaneously, and there will be lots of Tibet actions.

Further, big set-piece actions that come off well can actually dis-empower those watching from the outside. (This is basic theory of “the spectacle”, of the dangerous myth of the ten foot tall eco-warrior stuff that we learned before or at Newbury, but seem to have forgotten).

If the worst case scenario comes off, or a version of it, then the campers who come, and the organisers, will be disheartened and dismayed, and many may decide that climate change campaigning is simply too difficult (I sympathise). And the whole process will have the whiff of defeat about it.

So what, as the man said, is to be done?

Well, as another man said, there is a Third Way.

If the camp were to take a decision (and maybe it already has, I'm Not In The Loop) that REGARDLESS of the outcome of this year's Camp, there WON'T BE A NATIONAL CAMP in 2009 and that the year will be spent consolidating and building local structures and events (and maybe learning Danish for the fun and games of Copenhagen in December?) and that this decision is binding on any post-Camp meeting, then 'best-case/worst-case' becomes irrelevant. Regardless of what the fates or the filth or the media have in store for the Camp, the Camp movement could boldly proclaim its own destiny was in its own hands. And if the Camp makes this decision BEFORE the 2008 Camp, that would mean it the Camp itself can be a space for concretely talking and planning “what next”.

But it's very very difficult to see how this could happen. People at the Camp for the first time would feel aggrieved that the decision about the Camp's future was being taken from their hands.

So, the gap between what needs to be done and what can be done is enormous.

Strangely like climate change itself.