Occupy Melbourne General Assembly Photo Nick Carson

CASE STUDY: OCCUPY MELBOURNE – A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

In September 2011 the Occupy movement, inspired in part from the Spanish Indignados movement, and kicked off by Occupy Wall Street, exploded worldwide, with uprisings in 951 cities in 82 countries. In Australia, the most high profile Occupy presence was in Melbourne.

> **"Occupy Melbourne became the largest occupation in Australia, and indeed, the southern hemisphere. Like most truly novel historical events, the Occupy movement caught most people off guard."**
> *James Muldoon, Occupy Reflects*

Whilst the range of political views and experiences across the world were as diverse as the participants, a simmering sense of injustice, and the feeling that something was 'not quite right' on a range of fronts – across economic, social justice and environmental concerns; seemed to drive the involvement of some of the Melbourne participants.

Other occupations in the United States established by people with a clearer initial focus on economic justice – neatly summarised by the 'We are the 99%' slogan – which contrasted the experience of the majority of Americans with the wealthiest 1% who exploit them for economic gain.

Some of the encampments elsewhere seemed to be initiated by people with more experience and clearer anti-authoritarian/ anarchist organising principles, however, there was a much more varied and diverse group that made up Occupy Melbourne.

> **"Occupy was my first real taste of activism, I don't know why, I've always been an activist at heart, outraged by the injustice of the status quo...I guess I just have not been terribly active."** *Kate Phillips, Occupy Reflects*

A general sense of inequity, and disaffection with government were broad underlying themes that motivated Occupy Melbourne supporters. Their concerns covered a range of issues across the economic, environmental and social justice spheres.

Features of Occupy Melbourne:

• Participants from diverse backgrounds, and political ideologies

• Substantial proportion of people with limited exposure or experience to other campaigns or activist related skill sets

- Minimal involvement from established progressive groups initially meant a lack of experienced activists to draw on for support and sharing skills

- Differing political perspectives and experience meant that clarity of messages and priorities was hard to agree on, and subsequently communicate to broader audiences

- Rapid expansion and growth combined with a violent eviction resulted in limited capacity for training, developing new skills or debriefing

With a very broad scope, and very little initial involvement from experienced activists, came extraordinary challenges. It was trial by fire, in the most brutal sense. Young people who had never written a media release were flayed publicly on talkback radio. People that had previously never ran more than a small student collective meeting were suddenly trying to seek consensus decisions from 500 people with little understanding or experience themselves of large scale democratic decision-making.

General themes of social and economic justice, highlighting unsustainable and environmentally unethical ways of living were concepts that were too broad for mainstream media. With the added challenges of a 'leaderless' movement without charismatic spokespeople, they found it challenging to report given their need for limited sound bytes.

Political differences based in differing ideologies and exacerbated by unclear communication and challenging open facilitation 'general assemblies' meant too much time was spent on minutiae and not enough time spent on building resilience, developing common ground and sharing skills.

It was chaotic, and extraordinary and it was some people's first experience of living with a sense of community. In part this became part of the problem – for those that had experienced the sense of community that was palpable in the first week held stubbornly to the tactic of overnight occupation, which became increasingly unsustainable due to ongoing police harassment, surveillance and the physical and emotional challenges of living in a public space.

Despite all this, the Occupy movement worldwide, with all of the baggage and media tarnish was important in putting issues of economic and social justice on the map.

Key Republican strategist Frank Lutz noted that Occupy had totally shifted the debate on capitalism:

> **"I'm so scared of this anti-Wall Street effort. I'm frightened to death,"** *Luntz said.* **"They're having an impact on what the American people think of capitalism… "I'm trying to get that word removed and we're replacing it with either 'economic freedom' or 'free market'… The public . . . still prefers capitalism to socialism, but they think capitalism is immoral. And if we're seen as defenders of quote, Wall Street, end quote, we've got a problem."**

In Australia, with a significantly different economic and political climate the occupy movement failed to gain traction – the growing inequity between rich and poor was buffered by Australia's avoidance of the worst of the Global Financial Crisis.

Nonetheless, that growing sense of unease brought people to the streets in huge numbers – as social media exploded with the brutal eviction of Occupy Melbourne, and many more hundreds, then thousands of people headed into the city – the issue was that there was no clarity, poor communications and under skilled and under-resourced newcomers who did not have the capacity to direct the anger and unrest into constructive activity.

Occupy as a concept was unsustainable – this has been borne out in the dismantling of virtually all Occupy encampments within months of their early rise. Faced with coordinated police repression and environmental challenges, it was a great experiment that failed.*

However seeds have been planted all over the world, in readiness for the next spark, and in Melbourne there are several groups that have arisen out of working collaboratively at Occupy – given time and space to build group process and clear campaign objectives or focus, the experience of Occupy has kicked off many activist projects worldwide.

> **"Melbourne First Aid and Care retain the key Occupy philosophies of horizontalism, adherence to nonviolence and consensus whilst lending our first aid skills to support social justice causes as varied as refugees in detention, environmental destruction and labour rights. Caring is a political act. It can only strengthen our activist community."** *Jason Coggins, Melbourne FACT (now Melbourne Street Medics)*

Key lessons:

- Whilst Occupy Melbourne, and the broader movement has been referred to by some commentators as a 'failure' it radicalised a new group of activists, who are now contributing on a range of progressive issues.

- We can continue to expect force to be deployed to crush a movement that challenges the legitimacy of the system. This knowledge can help us plan accordingly for future struggles.

- Priority should be given to develop a better habit of skill sharing and training into all environmental and social justice campaigning.

- We need to continue to engage movement leaders and elders, so that knowledge can be passed down, and retained. Lessons learnt through previous anti-globalisation protests could have been much better shared for the benefit of newcomers.

- There is a need for greater collaboration on issues of common ground, and an ability to compromise that progressive campaigners could heed from conservatives – we may need to adapt our own priorities to focus on clear and achievable outcomes we can coalesce around.

- We need to learn from failure and develop improved capacity for reflection, and ensure that debriefs are embedded in our organising culture.

*Footnotes reference for the police crackdown

Wolf, N., 2012, 'Revealed: how the FBI coordinated the crackdown on Occupy', The Guardian, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/29/fbi-coordinated-crackdown-occupy

Vakalis, D., McCulloch, J., 2011, 'Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue', Overland literary journal http://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-occupy/feature-jude-mcculloch-and-david-vakalis/