

Extinction Rebellion in Aotearoa: the possibilities and pitfalls of importing a social movement organisation

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Abstract

As social movement organisations spread across the world in chains of influence and inspiration, local activists have an opportunity to form a branch, capitalise on the international recognition and attract new members. Extinction Rebellion in Aotearoa New Zealand did just this and faced two familiar dilemmas. At the level of strategy, we failed to respond to criticism of our key demand from some indigenous activists. At the tactical level, a lack of cohesion over the organisational structure and tactics at our formation led to a weak organisation unable to successfully engage in complicated strategic or tactical discussion.

Key words: climate justice, social movement, decolonisation, organisation, structure, New Zealand, indigenous rights

XR in a global context

Extinction Rebellion (XR) has been widely written about, including by the co-founder of this journal. What has been less discussed - in mainstream news media and the activist media (Waltz, 2005) of which I'm aware - are the fates of XR groups that have emerged around the world, taking inspiration from, and trying to adapt, the XR model to their context. Globally, the reach of the XR social movement organisation (SMO) was most obviously seen during the 2019 October "Rebellion" - members are called rebels, since XR is in "rebellion" against governments. Across Europe, mobilisations drew consistently upwards of 200 people into action. XR France had hundreds occupying a bridge in central Paris for five days before joining an occupation of a shopping centre with the *gilets jaunes*, amongst other groups.¹ Eastern European XR groups, notably in Prague, experienced 130 arrests for blockades that were quickly and brutally repressed. Tens of thousands of people across Australian² and North American cities turned out, whilst smaller protests, many with direct action tactics, were carried out in Israel and Slovakia. So too micro actions, with handfuls of people,

¹ The *gilets jaunes* are a largely working class group who emerged to contest the introduction of a higher tax on fuel. Notable since their coordination was the kind of cross-class mobilisation that critics demand of XR.

² If you're in need of a cheer up, the Melbourne civil disobedience video should make you smile. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGMKumKBZJI&list=PLy9GWp6Jz-SMFeYE7XpEj5qXztdwoRtAW&index=12&t=7s>

happened in places like Sri Lanka, Kiev, Moldova and the Democratic Republic of Congo.³

Though analysing the success or significance of XR groups globally in terms of their outcomes is outside the scope of my reflections, here in Aotearoa, along with pressure from school climate strikers, all of the regional councils have now declared a climate emergency in one form or another. In the UK a much watered down citizens assembly was installed by parliament.

Criticisms of the UK mothership have centred on its middle-classness, lack of membership diversity and unsuitable tactics for engaging minority communities (Knights, 2019 and Cox, 2019).⁴ The UK groups strategy was to overwhelm the police and justice system by tactically saturating it with arrests was criticised for excluding people of colour, since many experience the police as structurally racist and an agent of oppression. Though the UK has no indigenous population and affiliate groups such as XR Muslims and XR Jews exist, the majority white membership was seen as an obstacle to building a truly representative and powerful movement (Knights, 2019). Climate and ecological justice can not be properly achieved unless those bearing the brunt of climate breakdown, be it populations in the Global South, or the working poor in the UK, are represented at the table when solutions are formed.

The XR group in Aotearoa New Zealand - XR ANZ - is an excellent example of a white-led movement grappling with these contradictions in a country with an indigenous population. My hope is our successes and failures can help to illustrate what to do, and perhaps more importantly, what not to do. I believe they are representative of the possibilities and pitfalls of importing a social movement organisation.

Through this lens, XR ANZ has faced three key challenges; one structural, one tactical and, most salient in the context of a global resurgence of anti-racism, one strategic. Firstly, Aotearoa lacked the structural resources to capitalize on the wave of global protest; by this I mean a lack of a well-known radical tradition or a deep soil from which effective movements could emerge. Secondly, we struggled with a tactical problem of replicating the UK structure. One built for a much bigger organisation than ours and one that was not formulated by those who started the XR ANZ organisation. Finally, we imported a white-led concept into a country with an indigenous population and faced the strategic problem of how to resolve this tension. Our key demand, for a Citizens Assembly, was seen as illegitimate by an influential group of indigenous activists.

³ The international XR newsletter provides round-ups from many of the smaller groups which don't cut through to international media.

⁴ These criticisms have come constructively from XR members and encouraging observers, as well as the legacy media, with an altogether less constructive attitude

Introduction

XR UK's foundation, structure and strategy have been widely discussed (Beckett, 2020).⁵ I will only explain these again when contrasting them to our local context. By way of a brief introduction though, Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a social movement organisation engaged in non-violent civil disobedience demanding governments install a Citizens Assembly to deliberate and decide the policy response to climate breakdown. It began in the UK in November 2018 and quickly found fame with its April 2019 "Rebellion", which for ten days ground central London to a halt and resulted in over 1,000 arrests. The movement has spread to seventy countries, Aotearoa New Zealand being one of them.

Over the last eighteen months, XR ANZ has tried to come to terms with the critiques of XR's theory of change and strategy. Though I believe our experience with the strategic problem of how to integrate Māori *kaupapa* - Māori principles - into XR ANZ is the most valuable lesson from our work, I will start with the tactical and structural problems we faced, since it allows for linear narrative.

Origins

A recurring phenomenon in the origin of social movements is the existence of the 'deep soil from which they grow' (Austin, 2018). So many iconic and successful movements grow from an ecosystem that preceded the immediate trigger point. Either from a network of activists or an intentional training institute, the consistent presence of an ecology of people and groups is striking. The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements had the Highlander Center and the cadres from political organisations like the NAACP and the SWP. More recently, the Sunrise Movement and Black Lives Matter founders attended the Momentum training centre, 'front-loading' their DNA, vision and strategy before launching.⁶ Even in revolutionary settings such as the Arab Spring uprisings, in Tunisia, emergent protesters had been in contact online, in groups like Nawaat, before the movement sparked to life (Tufekci, 2017). Similarly before the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement turned to direct action, three organisations existed that were already strategising for democratic renewal (Ma and Cheng, 2019).

The same was true for XR in the UK. Many of the founding group knew one another from past campaigns and were part of a fledgling network called Rising Up! which laid out a grand strategy document in 2017, foreshadowing what eventually became Extinction Rebellion.⁷ Rising Up! itself was preceded by Compassionate Revolution, which Gail Bradbrook and Sarah Lunn - two XR

⁵ I refer here to its origin story, its decentralised leaderless structure and its key strategic element of deliberately seeking arrest

⁶ Momentum runs movement building trainings based on the work of the Ayni Institute. They've had groups such as Cosecha, If Not Now and Black Visions come through

⁷ Available online <https://risingup.org.uk/about> (Last accessed 14 November 2020)

co-founders - launched in 2015. Roger Hallam, for a time a key strategist and spokesman, was part of the Radical Think-Tank, an activist blog-cum-website that went alongside his Phd and through which he tried to test many of the mobilising tactics that XR went on to use such as conditional commitments. The people that started XR ANZ had none of this shared training or history that builds trust and the cohesion of ideas.

A structural problem

The group who launched XR in NZ lacked both the cadre who could guide and support the group nor a specific institute that incubated it or that they could turn to for training. The initial founders weren't friends or acquaintances, instead they came together inspired by the declaration of rebellion issued in London in November 2018. They were from both the South and North Islands and they were a mix of anarchists, conservationists and environmentalists. To be sure, some early members had activist experience and had been, or were part of, other groups but it could not reasonably be described as a flourishing network.⁸

There have been short-lived attempts to provide this pillar of movement infrastructure in New Zealand. Various training organizations have come and gone, with Kotare, a 'school for social change', the only one to continually exist. Launched in 1999 it was set-up in the mould of the Highlander Institute to offer a sense of place and ground social change learning in the context of a settler-colonial nation. However it doesn't offer the kind of fixed curricula focusing on the craft of organising that one can see in organisations like NEON UK, Campaign Bootcamp or Momentum in the USA.

Indeed, though many iconic movements have flourished here; the Anti-Apartheid Springbok Tour of 1981, Nuclear-free New Zealand, Anti-GE and the Māori land rights movement to name a few, there appears to be a limited institutional memory easily available (Boraman, 2012).⁹ We were home to the world's first environmental political party, the Values Party of 1972, that eventually became the Green Party (Gahrton, 2015). For a time in the mid twentieth century, Aotearoa had a scandinavian style welfare state, but neoliberalism was brought in by a Labour government in 1984 and smashed the power of the once powerful unions. All this to say that despite having a rich history of successful protest, we lack the infrastructure to maintain the knowledge of past movements.

⁸ Experienced members came from a plethora of small community environmental groups, whilst others were part of Coal Action Network. However there was a lack of sophisticated activist knowledge in campaign building and strategic thinking.

⁹ The NZ On Screen website has an excellent "Protest" collection of documentaries covering many of these movements

XR UK had developed a tight DNA, vision and strategy after deliberating about what had tried and failed in UK social movement history.¹⁰ Whether or not it resulted in the best idea in the world, the key point is that there was consensus and ownership of this strategy before they launched, allowing for a thrust of ‘singing off the same hymn sheet’. They settled on the ambitious tactic, a capital city shut-down through a street blockade, that whilst not new, was able to create in April 2019 what the US based Momentum movement building centre call a ‘Moment of Whirlwind’ (Engler and Engler, 2017, pp. 178). I freely admit I was inspired by the grand rhetoric and ambition of the tactic, but when I later read about the 1971 Mayday Tribe occupation of Washington, D.C. I was frustrated. That protest, with remarkably similar intentions, to literally shut down all government buildings, ended in a record 7,000 arrests but made little impact in terms of its strategic intent, foreshadowing XR UK’s less successful Week of Action in October 2019.¹¹

Those who reacted to the wave of action in NZ did not go through this process of deliberation and there were no institutions to guide them as they learned. Some ongoing coordination was sought from Greenpeace, but this was more like tactical training rather than strategic or organisational, and so did not help till the soil of the movement.¹² Indeed, there is a limited culture of organising in Aotearoa. A surprise and a shame perhaps, given that Aotearoa lays a claim for inspiring modern peaceful resistance. In 1881 Te Whiti o Rongomai, a Māori *rangatira* - a chief - along with Tohu Kākahi, led their people in defending their Parihaka *marae* - their village and meeting grounds - by using peaceful disruptive strategies and non-violently resisting arrest from police (Te Miringa Hohaia, 2001). Their land was under attack from government surveyors who, true to colonial form, sought to claim it for the white settler people. Te Whiti instructed his people to erect fencing across roads and plough up Pākehā - non-Māori European - farmers’ paddocks. Their militant pacifism went as far as offering soldiers who entered the village fresh bread and a song. Embarrassed by their failure to seize the land by provoking the Parihaka people to fight them, on 5 November, more than 1,500 armed men led by the Native Affairs Minister surrounded the township and finally arrested Te Whiti. In the following weeks, residents were evicted and their houses destroyed. News of the event made its

¹⁰ They have drawn much ire from long-time campaigners for their narrative that says everything else before them has failed, nothing except what we’re proposing has failed. Though on reflection this is clearly disingenuous, it arguably worked wonders as a rhetorical tactic to ignite passions amongst new activists.

¹¹ My jaw dropped when I read about this action, the tactic and the rhetoric they used in 1971 was so similar to XR UK in the lead-up to their London action.

¹² Greenpeace were very generous with use of their office space in Auckland for things like banner painting and equipment borrowing, a less celebrated but nevertheless essential cog in the functioning of an active protest movement

way to Mohandas Gandhi via the liberal press in London and is said to have influenced his formulation of *satyagraha* (McDonald, 2018).¹³

Many of the members active in the first few months of XR ANZ soon drifted away, to be replaced by a new group bringing the same inexperience and lack of personal connection. At a national level, this led to a weak institutional memory and decisions were repeatedly discussed, having already been agreed. Similarly, with a largely new activist base, there was a lack of understanding and acceptance of the core strategy and tactics of XR. We encountered the classic problem of interpreting our main tactic as our strategy. The XR UK tactic that was so inspiring - occupying the city centre for ten days - became our entire strategy, and critical discussions about its efficacy lacked the sophistication necessary to pivot us to something different.

In the run-up to our first big day of action in October 2019, the organising XR Wellington branch lacked both the skills to pull off the ambitious tactic that it had not demonstrated it could do, and a lack of awareness of the action as existing within our wider strategy. The location of the road blockade was changed the evening before the action. The original choice had been of no logistical value, whereas the last minute change - the result of late consultation with more experienced activists - to outside the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment gave the action a stronger narrative.¹⁴ Many of the organisers suffered total burnout and left XR ANZ shortly after. Indeed, had a couple of activist veterans - one was an XR member and the other an employee of Greenpeace - not taken control of operations on the day of the action, it would have ended once the blockade was set-up at seven in the morning. In the end they were able to lead a series of spontaneous swarming tactics, resulting in an occupation of ANZ bank, which turned out to be the high point for 54% of those who completed the Action review survey.¹⁵

Tactical problem

This lack of experience and cohesion meant that as a national organization we faced a familiar tactical problem; how to structure ourselves. We watched as XR UK grew exponentially, producing YouTube explainers and online resources about how to build the movement, but we struggled to apply them here. We tried to import the structure of XR UK wholesale. Their sophisticated 'Self-Organising System' (SOS) was based on decentralisation and strategic

¹³I can't find any scholarly reference to this fact, but it seems likely Gandhi would have heard of the story in London, given New Zealand was a British colony, and the strategy of resistance at Parihaka was so novel to colonial officers.

¹⁴ The MBIE had granted new oil drilling licenses despite there being an incoming ban on new permits

¹⁵ Again this initiative was encouraged by one of those experienced activists. XR Auckland wrote the survey a review of the day of action. 152 people responded. Available here <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dgWxKtQ4ZmG3EZIxMTV5Ccg-GA8WSPNV/view?usp=sharing>

autonomy within each ‘circle’.¹⁶ They had dozens of activists working full-time and being paid voluntary living expenses (VLE), whereas in Aotearoa, during 2019, we had a handful of members who were retired or else out of employment, but only a few people treating XR ANZ as a full-time project. This meant that separating accountabilities, for example by copying the UK and having one person travel the country running public talks and finding local volunteers to set-up regional branches, was hard. This is, of course, not unique to us, as anyone who’s campaigned will know, but I believe what is unique to importing a social movement organisation, is that the roadmap, or documentation coming from the UK - which was really impressive and helpful - also made us over complicate too quickly. We weren’t able to provide the steady accountability that comes when people are focused on one role or are available full-time. This issue was periodically brought up as a point of tension, but we had no-one with the experience to suggest and then implement a different structure.

By trying to implement this structure to a group of near-strangers working voluntarily, we were successful only in creating a complex web of working groups at both a local and national level that became a bureaucratic jigsaw. In the Auckland branch, when I joined in May 2019, there were supposedly eight working groups serving a core of around ten active members.¹⁷ At a national level we worked through three main circles; Organisation, Action and Communication, and each had their own meetings. Though in reality the same people attended each one, we created the illusion of growth and coherence when in fact it was confusing to those keen to take part but unsure where key decisions were made. Key activists were attending two or three meetings a week and without people focusing on action, the time was spent on structural and organisational disputes. A sure sign of movement inertia (Alinsky, 1946). This was one of the biggest and most simple lessons I learned. An absence of focus on action leads to internal disagreement.

As COVID-19 hit in March 2020 a handful of people held multiple key roles each. As an example, I was the National Coordination Circle facilitator, the newsletter writer (for Auckland and National) and the Coordinator of; the May Rebellion Action group, the Auckland induction sessions and one of two volunteer coordinators.

Our weak institutional organisation proved decisive again in January 2020 when myself and two other Auckland members had the opportunity to work full-time on XR if we had been able to draw some basic living costs, as the UK activists had done. We had \$40,000 in the bank, but a lack of precedent and process meant this opportunity fell by the wayside. It is highly likely others would have stepped forward had we been able to create a transparent process

¹⁶ A recent video explaining how the structure works
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3qr7sRgODs> Last accessed 3 September 2020

¹⁷An internal policy document written in February 2019 outlines our dizzying number of working groups <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mqQ3e0fhrdsoopDEstwl4-6y5g6E-TgVvbqhiHSLGxA/edit?usp=sharing> Last accessed 3 September 2020

for making this happen. As studies have shown (Schussmann and Soule, 2005) biographical availability is key in determining participation in protest, especially in movements attempting intensive street protest. Having full-time activists increasingly feels necessary to produce a mass movement and we missed this opportunity. The more one reads about big movements, the more one realises they contain a dedicated core of people devoting their working life to them.¹⁸ A factor under discussed when strategizing in mass popular movements to transform society. In particular for contexts like Aotearoa, with a small and dispersed population without a strong philanthropic culture of foundation grant giving, it is an area I'd like to research more about what they do in places like Norway, or Estonia, or Bolivia or Paraguay to build and sustain participation¹⁹

As alluded to earlier, XR ANZ's organisation has been poor, suffering the symptoms many movements will be familiar with; transient membership, volunteer burnout and inexperienced activists unfamiliar with good organisational hygiene. Specific to Aotearoa New Zealand and frequently highlighted in internal dialogue is our geographical inaccessibility between regions. There is no inter-city train network and our members are dispersed across a landmass similar in size to the UK but with only 4.5 million inhabitants. As such, national in-person meetings, so key for relationship and trust building have been non-existent outside of our October 2019 mobilisation. When one compares the genesis of XR ANZ with its contemporaries like the Sunrise Movement, Black Lives Matter or, indeed, XR UK, the differences become stark.²⁰

A lack of national coordination has an interesting precedent in Aotearoa when the Progressive Youth Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, in the Wellington, Christchurch and Auckland branches all had distinct politics, cultures and class composition (Boraman, 2012). Had a group consciously come together to build a movement, this spadework may have been done and a culture of travelling between the regions to build a relational foundation could have been installed.

Strategic problem

The strategic innovation of XR UK, as we understood it, was to unite under a broad enough demand that could accommodate the individual policy preferences of anyone who joined. If you've attended even five minutes of an

¹⁸I refer to movements like the Umbrella Movement or Sunrise, who have a core paid staff, as well as the obvious like the American CRM, which was also backed up by enormous amounts of unpaid labour from african-american women (Collier and Franklin, 2001)

¹⁹ I refer here to the many training materials I have seen from various organisations providing training for activists and to a lack of specific discussion on formal staffing

²⁰ There was much internal wrangling about whether to travel to our Wellington Rebellion in October 2019 by plane. For many, it was fly or don't come, given the bus travel times. Auckland to Wellington is an 11 hour bus ride, for example, and twice the price of a flight. But there were still some who chose not to attend because they did not want to fly and couldn't spend three or four days away.

environmental activist meeting you'll likely have suffered the tendency toward endless debate on the merits, or otherwise, of people's pet solutions to the climate crisis. XR UK bypassed this problem by demanding that a Citizen's Assembly be installed by the government to deliberate on the policy response to climate breakdown. Thus anyone who wanted change could agitate through XR, because the possibility of their personal vision being realised remained alive. Nuclear-energy advocates, sustainable business consultants and anti-capitalists could all, in theory, support the demand.

Despite it being the only substantive of XR's three demands, it was rarely discussed in XR ANZ. Indeed, many members were not even sure what it actually meant and deliberations on its suitability for our context were slow to arise. It took the national coordinating group until February 2020, eighteen months after its establishment, to begin a formal process to draft a document stating exactly what XR ANZ meant when we demanded a Citizen's Assembly from the government of Aotearoa New Zealand. Until that point we had been sharing XR UK resources when we were asked to define it.²¹

Though adhering to the three demands and ten principles is the only requirement to take the XR brand, little thought had been given to the fact that we were operating in a country whose founding document is *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, the Treaty of Waitangi. Signed in 1840 by the Crown and Māori iwi chiefs, in the original *Te Reo Māori* translation it states that Māori will have *tino rangatiratanga* - or self-determination. In other words, it was supposed to be a power-sharing agreement with the *Pākehā* - the white-European settlers. It won't come as a surprise to readers to share that this wasn't what happened.²² Though contemporary governments nominally and in rhetoric, if not in practice, recognise this to be true, they avoid serious contemplation of the constitutional transformation required to reflect the original agreement.²³

The decision to finalise our interpretation of a Citizens Assembly was spurred by the negative reaction to the idea from some indigenous activists who saw it as yet another *Pākehā* introduced constitutional structure that would further marginalise *tangata whenua* - indigenous Māori. The strategic dilemma was thus twofold. Firstly; how to interpret an imported idea to a context where we claim to support climate justice, but supporting climate justice means centring indigenous voices and some indigenous voices were calling out our demand as fundamentally at odds with climate justice. And secondly, can we properly endorse *Te Tiriti*, Māori self-determination and constitutional transformation

²¹The XR UK guide <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Extinction-Rebellion-Guide-to-Citizens-Assemblies-Version-1.1-25-June-2019.pdf> Last accessed 3 September 2020

²²The crown systematically stole land from Māori, displacing them and pushing them into cities to find waged work.

²³ A Waitangi Tribunal was created after the Māori Lands Rights movement of the mid 1970s to process historical claims from iwi. Financial compensation numbering in the billions of dollars have been paid out for the land that was stolen.

when it is seen as a left-wing idea and the only parties in parliament to accept this trio are the newly re-elected Māori Party, with 2 MPs, and the Greens, with 10 MPs, who together only win around 10% of the vote and are seen, through traditional parliamentary political eyes, as left-wing.

Before I discuss the contention around the Citizens Assembly I will interrogate the tactical value of a Citizens Assembly a little further. As a tactic it is designed to allow more conservative minded people to engage and support its use. This is what XR's frame of "Beyond Politics" means: to reach across the left/right political binary. This was the story we told ourselves, but new research from the UK shows how this is in fact not what has happened. It showed that a majority of those arrested were Left-leaning voters and I've no reason to think it is any different here (Doherty et al, 2020). XR ANZ has made no strategic effort to engage socially conservative or National²⁴ voters who are concerned about the degradation of the natural world but who shy away from calls for radical economic change. It thus seems that ignoring the criticisms and demands from sections of the climate justice movement would undermine our credibility in what is the actual realistic base for potential future XR membership. Namely, indigenous climate activists, radical *Pākehā* activists who support Māori issues or Left-leaning voters more broadly.

The contention about a Citizens Assembly did not directly stem from a reaction to XR ANZ, but it could be said we were responsible through our absence. In May 2019 a splinter group from XR ANZ launched called Aotearoa Climate Emergency (ACE). With the sole intention to lobby for the creation of a Citizen's Assembly it convened a *hui* - a meeting - in November 2019 in Wellington. Dr Mike Joy, a freshwater ecologist and prominent campaigner spoke, as did Green MP Chlöe Swarbrick. It had significant interest amongst the climate movement. One attendee wrote a review of the *hui* for the left-liberal media outlet the Spinoff.²⁵ Of Māori *whakapapa* - genealogy - herself, she was concerned with how the random selection process would affect Māori,

The words 'representation' and 'power' triggered alarm bells. I wanted to know what this means for minorities, let alone tangata whenua [the original inhabitants of New Zealand]....How convenient, I thought, for the Citizens Assembly to use a numerical system of representation in a land where the indigenous population has already been decimated by colonisation.²⁶

A reply of sorts was made three months later by *Pākehā* academic Max Rashbrooke, one of NZ's most well-known writers, who produced an article in

²⁴ The conservative, right-wing Party in Aotearoa

²⁵ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/23-11-2019/who-gets-to-be-an-ordinary-new-zealander-on-citizens-assemblies-climate-change-and-tangata-whenua/> Last accessed, 3 September 2020

²⁶ Māori now make up only 16.5 percent of Aotearoa's population, indeed the Asian ethnic group is not far behind, at 15.1 percent and the white-Europeans are at 74 percent.

the same publication and defended the idea of Citizen's Assemblies by promoting their democratic potential. There was a negative reaction online from some indigenous activists that saw his reply as white-splaining on what is deemed a colonising idea to a *wahine Māori* - a Māori woman - and the Spinoff quickly took the article down.²⁷ He'd suggested that the Assembly would be better for Māori than many current democratic processes. One leader of an indigenous and youth climate organisation called *Te Ara Whatu*, wrote on Twitter, 'No matter which way you cut it, citizens assemblies are not tino rangatiratanga and I'm not really here for people whitesplaining why this model should be acceptable for us.'

It was shortly after this controversy that XR ANZ formed a working group to try and find a way to incorporate these criticisms. Calls for interest in doing this work through internal communications channels were met with a stony silence and only four people showed interest, joining the relevant Mattermost channel.²⁸ The key dilemma that needed to be resolved was how, or indeed whether, a Citizens Assembly could comply with the Treaty of Waitangi. In this initial group there was a consensus to make it so for two reasons; because it aligned with our personal political vision for the country i.e. the vision that matched that of those who had criticised the idea in Aotearoa; secondly it was too the most strategic thing to do, to try and win back support amongst those indigenous activists who felt that XR was just another *Pākehā* organisation undermining Māori sovereignty. We saw this is our realistic base of members, and thought the best way to build solidarity and thus a more powerful climate justice movement would be to belatedly begin trying to be better allies.

Our initial draft included a recommendation to produce two reports at the end of the deliberation process; one from the whole assembly; and a second from only the Māori participants. We hoped this would enable both a distinct Māori voice whilst also maintaining the essential element of a Citizens Assembly. We were confident that this option significantly improved the XR UK proposal that was being used as the de facto position of XR globally. Inconsistencies still remained, centring on the fact that Māori politics is conducted through *iwi* and *hapū* - tribes and sub-tribes - and selecting members at random is not a political tradition in *tikanga Māori* - the Māori way. However there was no way to allow specific representatives of *iwi* and *hapū* to attend the assembly without it losing the essential element of random selection that in theory allows for a truly representative selection of the population to take part, free from any power structures that may hinder their honest opinions and ideas. The central thesis of XR in the UK being that people have not made the best decisions about the political economy we have to address climate breakdown because of interests

²⁷ For obvious reasons this article is no longer available, but for the detectives among you, the broken link to the article from his tweet is visible at <https://twitter.com/MaxRashbrooke/status/1232783196669874176> Last accessed 3 September 2020

²⁸ Mattermost is the encrypted chat platform used by XR groups globally. Part of an enormous digital infrastructure custom made for the movement.

that get in the way; be they political party interests and re-election, corporate interests and profit-making, or in defence of private assets such as freedom to use cars, build houses or use energy. With a totally random and representative selection of everyday people, the theory goes, the solutions to climate breakdown could be deliberated on freely, and the outcome would be a report and policy platform far more in line with what is required to address the problem.

We felt it was clear that many governmental working groups, inquiries or policy commissions are conducted in far less democratic ways and with far less Māori representation than would be included with a Citizens Assembly. What was more important though, we learned, than establishing *if* a perfect Citizens Assembly model exists for a colonised nation, was *how* that deliberation was made. The fundamental essence remained that it was a white-led initiative, once again going to indigenous communities and asking for a blessing or consultation, rather than a joint idea creation. This is no way to build support from indigenous activists who you have given no reason to trust you (Margaret, 2015). We had not made our vision clear immediately on launching the group in late 2018, nor sought a diversity of Māori opinion on its benefits or otherwise.

That said, what was being criticised in New Zealand was the model promoted by the Aotearoa Climate Emergency group, which was lifted wholesale from the XR UK model. The members of ACE, in conversations with us, expressed no desire to try and address the concerns raised about the marginalisation of *tangata whenua* in their version. The possibility remains that had we produced our intention for a Citizen's Assembly at our founding; recognising its limitations; presenting it as a tactical move to win support from conservatives; explaining the outcome as a tactical move to create leverage over the government for the wider movement, and then placing it as a 'better-than-the-statue-quo' tool, things might have been different. To be sure, Māori representation in XR ANZ exists. There were a dedicated core of five in the Māori caucus, who were given the status of a full branch, despite being dispersed around the country.²⁹ Those in the Māori caucus who shared the concerns about Citizen's Assemblies saw it like we did, as imperfect but better than the status quo and that XR ANZ was a new, popular vehicle attracting new people and within which they could further their environmental campaigning.

In 2015 the Matike Mai report was published.³⁰ The result of three years of hui - assemblies - across *te ao Māori* - the Māori community - it established six potential constitutional futures for Aotearoa that would properly acknowledge and implement *Te Tiriti* as the nation's founding document. A beacon of hope for Māori activists, any new initiative not leading to full constitutional transformation was now seen as illegitimate by some. Historically, campaigns

²⁹ For comparison, the bigger cities had cores of around 15-20 people, and smaller places around 5-10

³⁰ The report is available at <https://nwo.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/MatikeMaiAotearoa25Jan16.pdf> Last accessed 7 September 2020

for decolonization, or economic and social justice more broadly, both in Aotearoa and globally, usually emerge from either the working-class communities themselves, or else left-wing groups. In Aotearoa, to endorse Māori sovereignty, deepen tikanga Māori in everyday life or engage in structural change to reduce the inequality between Māori and non-Māori is seen as something of the Left. Famously, before the 2005 general election, incumbent Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark, part of a Third Way social democratic politics, chose to back away from government reforms aimed at doing just this. She was spooked by new National Party leader Don Brash, whose strategy to provoke pākehā racial resentment by speaking out against any moves to separate the spheres of influence of the government and iwi and hapu - the Māori governing structures. (Hager, 2006). Brash ultimately lost, but Clark's capitulation and retreat from deepening Māori self-determination, set back the project of liberation for Māori. Thus any *Pākehā* group now seen to endorse the vision of the report is labelled as left-wing, something XR globally has sought to avoid. As our draft Citizens Assembly document went to an expanded working group for revisions a split emerged, with one member insisting, and thus objecting, because it had become 'a left-wing document'. The draft, explicitly recommending two separate reports, became instead a list of options, with our recommendation now just one of six possible choices.

Shortly after, beginning in March 2020, a series of workshops led by Te Ara Whatu were held, seeking to establish a coalition of demands from the climate movement for the September general election. Participants included the big NGOs like Oxfam, Amnesty and 350.org, as well as community level groups, including XR. It was immediately clear that to fulfill a commitment to climate justice in the eyes of the facilitators would mean dropping the citizen's assembly demand from XR's platform. It had lost all credibility to them.

We considered avoiding campaigning on the demand, though without it there was really nothing substantive that we were proposing. Indeed it was central to our planned campaign leading to the election. Another option, dropping the demand altogether, was not possible if we wanted to keep the XR name that had been such a magnet for new activists over the last year.

Māori representation

On the morning after the October 2019 rebellion, which was XR ANZ's first national day of action, a group of Māori XR members went back into the city and defaced a statue of Richard Seddon, Prime Minister of NZ in 1893, with a banner reading 'colonisation = exploitation = climate change'.³¹ Seddon was an avowed imperialist abroad and stole a lot of land from Māori. The action, which wasn't well communicated to the wider group until the night before, caused disillusionment from a minority of *Pākehā* members who felt it wasn't relevant

³¹ The picture is in the news article available at, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2019/10/extinction-rebellion-aotearoa-vandalises-statue-outside-parliament-to-protest-colonisation-climate-change.html> Last accessed 3 September 2020

to the climate crisis and would lose us support from ‘middle New Zealand’.³² However at the *hui* debrief later that day, a clear consensus emerged amongst the 200 hundred or so rebels to centre Māori voices in our future work. The Māori caucus was formed to help do this.

The functioning of this caucus, *Te Waka Hourua*, soon rubbed up against our weak organisational processes. They produced a *Te Reo Māori* translation and re-interpretation of the XR demands and principles.³³ Taking inspiration from XR USA, they added a fourth demand, recognising *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* as the founding document of Aotearoa.³⁴

By May 2020, the document had been completed and open for feedback for four months, though few branches or people responded. XR ANZ’s national rules were such that an adoption of significant quasi-constitutional changes, like accepting this document, required a National Council meeting to be called four weeks in advance by the National Coordination group. The knowledge of this process was made clear at several meetings but a Council was never called. The translation was adopted unilaterally by those present at a NatCo meeting on July 6th, with three members of the Māori caucus present. In other words, our historically agreed process was ignored and branches weren’t given warning that a big decision was being made. Though much of the membership did not notice, and most members agreed with the decision - including me, for the record - this episode clearly demonstrates a lack of organisational hygiene that could easily end in a negative result.

It is too early to tell how this new orientation will affect XR ANZ’s engagement but there is a consensus amongst the most active members to continue to embrace decolonisation. Money was granted by the global XR fund for anti-racism and Treaty workshops and several branches have begun to organise these. For now, there has been no immediate rush to the exit door from members, though one did email me privately saying ‘the devotion to climate justice is what has finally driven me out.’ However he’d only ever sporadically been involved and was the type of older white man who often spoke at length during meetings, so he won’t be missed.

Conclusion

XR ANZ rode the wave of attention and excitement that XR UK created. After April 2019 our meetings were flooded with new activists inspired by the scenes from London but XR ANZ developed neither the organisational hygiene nor

³² “Middle New Zealand” is a common phrase to describe the stereotypical, socially conservative white people who live in the smaller towns and cities

³³ <https://extinctionrebellion.nz/a-matou-nonoi-rarangi-tono/> Last accessed 3 September 2020

³⁴ Interestingly this strategic dilemma was evident too in the fate of XR USA. In April 2020 a group split to form XR America, citing the focus on communities of colour as an obstacle to urgent climate action. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xtF5lvTyumoDAfOS6-6-KOCgn2PredsgoGcvWqoaoug/edit> Last accessed, 7 September 2020

experienced membership to capitalise this into a cohesive movement.³⁵ We tried to adopt their structures, their organisational methods and their tactics without adjustment, which led to much time and effort wasted on bureaucratic discussion and confusion.

There were, of course, other flaws and strengths that XR ANZ has had which are outside the scope of this article. I hope the experience of negotiating criticism by influential indigenous activists is instructive to other groups wishing to push for racial and ecological justice. We can't know what the reception to the Citizens Assembly would have been had we adapted it to our context immediately and worked with a wider representation of the activist indigenous community from the start. Fundamentally, white-led groups need to earn the trust of marginalised ethnic communities *before* they can cooperate effectively and be seen as acting in good faith. And we must show solidarity, with resources as well as rhetoric, over a sustained period of time.

XR ANZ faced a familiar strategic dilemma. If we heed the calls to support the demands of the marginalised will we alienate a conservative block that currently holds power? It is as depressingly familiar as it is essential for us to overcome. It seems to me that unless and until groups have a serious strategy to change the mindsets of those who object to a full throttle climate, social and economic justice narrative, then we should show unrestrained support for the less powerful because we are not doing the organising necessary to bring the persuadable 60 percent middle to our side (Cassehgari, 2020). XR ANZ did not, in any systematic way, attempt to engage those conservative communities who could, in theory, be turned off by this climate justice message, so the extension dilemma (Jasper 2004) in hindsight, was a chimera. We were just undermining our realistic base of activists.

Fundamentally, XR ANZ suffered from poor organisational practice stemming from a lack of escalating and continuous action directed at strategic targets that galvanised the wider population. We tried to copy the UK and aimed straight for blockading a big city, hardly an innovative tactic, and did not have the resources to pull it off. In the space between our rhetoric and our actions, were built the stresses and strains of structure, indecision and disagreement. I hope our story can illuminate the path for others to follow when importing a social movement concept from abroad.

³⁵ We were equally unable to capitalise on the interest after the Australia bushfires, in Auckland we had 47 people attend our monthly induction in January, when our usual attendance was 8-12.

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