**Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaigns at Canadian Universities: 2012–2019**

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In August 2017 I began researching campus fossil fuel divestment (CFFD) campaigns across Canada, having previously been involved in the first campaign at U of T, organized by Toronto350.org and then Fossil Free U of T.[1] My research focuses on the consequences of participation for those involved, rather than trying to identify which approaches seem to produce the most success with university administrations. On the question of effectively persuading institutions, there is a lot of regional variation outside Canada, with a large fraction of UK universities divesting along with some in the US and elsewhere in the world. I hypothesized in my research proposal that the experiences people had in divestment campaigns would relate to how the groups were organized and made decisions — a position supported by considerable evidence in my 63 interviews. I anticipated that the degree of involvement from faculty would be a point of contention within CFFD campaigns, but did not expect the particular focus on performances of expertise within power structures in the work of Joe Curnow and her co-authors.[2]

In my proposal I hypothesized that within campaigns progress toward an apparently desirable outcome may encourage cooperative, persuasion-focused strategies while total rejection of campaign demands may provoke an escalation of activist tactics. There are cases in Canada where campaigns experienced such progressions, culminating in the most contentious actions undertaken by CFFD campaigns so far in the form of on-campus building occupations, camp-outs, and sit-ins, sometimes during periods when CFFD activists took part in potentially arrestable non-violent direct actions including occupying the offices of cabinet ministers and blocking Sussex Drive outside the prime ministerial residence. At the same time, the interviews show that campaigns changed strategies for many reasons and were often internally divided before deciding on a specific tone and approach at a given point. The question of whether to wear suits and be dignified or wear huge fake moustaches and make a scene was debated and narrowly decided at the last minute by a Canadian CFFD campaign. Graduations of key organizers were described alongside rejections by administrations as major blows to campaigns, yet despite very little formal structure, resources, or institutional memory many campaigns were able to endure through multiple setbacks. In so doing, they developed new generations of first and second year students into future leaders within those campaigns and more broadly.

The CFFD movement shows the power that an organization like 350.org has when it issues a call to take largely pre-determined actions to an appropriately capable, self-organized, and self-motivated audience. An organization of their size could never hope to coordinate the hundreds of campaigns at universities globally, alongside others in religious organizations, private foundations, municipalities, pension funds, and other institutions which are being pressed to stop investing in fossil fuel corporations. There was some variation in how the "campaign in a box" was implemented in each place, with a few campaigns consistently and exclusively cooperative and persuasion-focused in their messaging and approach while most used a mixture of persuasion and pressure tactics.

[1] On the U of T campaign, see http://www.uoftfacultydivest.com/ and particularly http://www.uoftfacultydivest.com/files/Community-Response.pdf. On my PhD research project: https://www.sindark.com/projects/phd-thesis/

[2] See: Joe Curnow, Amil Davis, and Lila Asher. "Politicization in Process: Developing Political Concepts, Practices, Epistemologies, and Identities Through Activist Engagement." https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0002831218804496

The concept of climate justice is present throughout the movement, though scholars and activists disagree on what such a "justice" approach constitutes in terms of political strategy, issue-linkage, and coalition building. The people who created the campaign in a box think of themselves as climate justice organizers, yet participants in some CFFD campaigns progressively understood their own actions as a rejection of entrenched patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist power structures within climate change and environmental activism itself. Disagreements about the root cause and fundamental nature of climate change explain the cleavage between the relative pragmatists and incrementalists who see more potential allies on the moderate political right than on the ever-more-extreme political left and radicals who see any failure to extend solidarity to a worthy cause connected to the general anti-oppressive struggle as cowardice or moral failure.

In practice, campaigns lacked decision-making structures which were effective in their self-defined terms, including whether campaigns in general and positions of power within them were inclusive, decision making was participatory, and consensus was the standard of agreement. While informality reduced time spent on bureaucratic management, it has contributed to the lack of institutional memory within campaigns about their own past efforts. Undefined consensus, even when implemented in a consciously anti-oppressive context, risks inadvertently reinforcing the power structures it means to disrupt by making personal relationships more important to group decision making than collectively reasoned and agreed choices made among the self-defined membership meeting together in person.

CFFD campaigns across Canada drew from a common repertoire of performances in seeking to influence target administrations, the general public, political decision makers, the finance industry, and one another. These are not inconsistent with past social movements, and may indeed be considered tame compared to those in the US Civil Rights or Anti-Vietnam War movements, essentially peaking at direct confrontations between activists and board members in meeting rooms and multi-day occupations where activists were not disrupted or relocated by campus security or the police. There is evidence the CFFD movement did communicate successfully to the financial community — which is now at least aware of the argument that fossil fuels represent stranded assets because we need to keep climate change under control — and institutional investors have been provoked into thinking more systematically and seriously about their exposure to climate-related risks. That may be an ironic consequence for a movement linked to Naomi Klein's anti-corporate perspective, but there has definitely been development in the field of climate-screened assets and investment vehicles. The climate justice perspective emphasizes the vulnerability of the world's poorest to climate change and, while the moral case is convincing, there is cause to consider the case that the property owners of the world are under the largest collective threat from climate change. Doubtless there should be more equality and perhaps in the politics of the future those who are currently disempowered will be appropriately represented, but the route from convincing the rich to protect their assets by dealing with climate change seems more direct than the route of overpowering the rich and then establishing a new political and economic order which will hopefully be committed to keeping the climate stable, and thus rapidly decarbonizing by abandoning fossil fuels.

Universities developed effective counter-repertoires which have justified rejection of most Canadian CFFD campaigns. These include using bureaucratic processes to delay decisions beyond the timeframe of involvement by particular undergraduates. More broadly, universities have responded by listing all their past and ongoing climate-related actions, providing a list of objections to divestment, and justifying non-divestment actions as sufficient responses to climate change.