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If you've been at all involved in 'the activist scene' or anti-summit mobilisations in recent years, its highly likely that you will have participated in 'consensus' decision making processes. Originating in the feminist and environmental movements, 'Consensus' is now the primary mode of organisation for many 'activist' groups and campaigns. The current vogue for camps of various kinds, at mobilisations, at protest sites, and as national and international gatherings, has led to an increasing number of small temporary environments which self-govern through linked consensus-based planning meetings.

I have personally participated in many such meetings, and my opinion on the process has shifted from a belief in the emancipatory qualities of the form to a deep unease about its prevalence. A series of negative experiences, and a consistently recurring set of problems has led me to conclude that the consensus decision making process is flawed, anti-democratic and potentially hierar-

chical. As a libertarian communist, my interest is in seeking a form of self-organisation which negates the possibility of power being entrenched in minorities, and leads to the full participation of all. Consensus decision making is not this form.

The key experience which broke my belief in the model was at the No Borders Camp, held near Crawley in September 2007. The aim was to gather together the various No Borders groups working in cities throughout the UK, and to protest against the new immigration centre being built at Gatwick airport, which would detain over 400 people, including children. However, thanks to police harassment of local farmers, along with other factors, the camp ended up near the village of Balcombe, at a spot in the middle of the countryside a good distance from anything of relevance.

The camp was organised through twice-daily general meetings, run, like the local groups, along consensus lines. Although i had to leave the camp before it reached its full size, I participated in large meetings, many with well over a hundred participants. During the course of these meetings, certain questionable dynamics became increasingly apparent. The turning point, however, came on my third day. The land was being rented to the camp by a local farmer, who seemed quite politically indifferent but who to his credit wasn't phased by police intimidation tactics. One of his conditions for the use of his field was that there would be no dogs permitted on site. However, during the course of the day, several New Age Travellers turned up who lived in their vehicles with their dogs. Those at the gate remonstrated with them, but eventually let them in with their animals, not wanting to turn them away.

The issue was the main topic of discussion for an extremely long meeting held that evening in the main circus tent. The aforementioned unhealthy dynamic was the fact that the organisers of the camp tended to dominate the meetings, constituting an unofficial core group, a de facto elite who knew each other and who usually knew the facilitator who volunteered his or herself at the beginning

decisions on important issues, or in situations where we want to preclude the development of elites and to establish the emancipation of all participants. A voting procedure with full debate and an elected and recallable chair is much more preferable.

certainly prevents them from indulging or favouring intransigent minorities.

Therefore what I propose is a procedure in which discussion and debate around proposals is followed by a vote, with influential positions being delegated and recallable. The majority required is obviously up to groups, though two-thirds seems a reasonable number to this author.

Anarchists and other libertarian socialists who choose to invest time in 'activism' often defend the consensus decision making process as one fit for a horizontal society based on the socialisation of production and democratic control of the economy by workers. This is based on a flawed belief that this makes it more difficult for minority groups to manipulate proceedings. However, experience of consensus processes at the anti-G8 mobilisations in Heiligendamm, Germany, and other campaigns has demonstrated to me the ease with which recuperative forces such as statist-socialists, liberals, and reformist greens can undermine militant action, pushing conclusions towards their party lines through appeals to the lowest common denominator. But if we turn to the historical record of workers' self-organisation in syndicates, workers' councils and assemblies then we see the prevalence of the voting form. From the Soviets to the Spanish Collectives to the Argentinian factory occupations, we see votes being taken. Voting in no way precludes infiltration and recuperation, but it certainly prevents militant action supported by a majority from being watered down or diverted by a minority. The consensus decision making form is alien to the workers' movement. This is not to attack the movements from which it emerged – for a feminist critique of consensus decision making see The Tyranny of Structurelessness by Jo Freeman.

Having said all this, there are examples where consensus can work, for instance in small groups (10 or under) or people who know, trust and respect each other. In many cases this happens anyway and doesn't need to be fetishised – where we're deciding to drink, for instance. But it is totally inadequate for large-scale

of the session. They formed one side, pitched against the three or four travellers.

Clearly, it would be impossible for consensus to be achieved. As I perceived it the majority of the participants were keen not to be kicked off the land, and wanted the dogs out. Obviously, the dog-owners wanted to stay. This led to a majority of around at least ten-to-one wanting the dogs banned (which were the rules anyway), with the travellers putting up the fairly weak argument that them having to follow any such rules was inherently authoritarian and against the ethos of internationalism. Complete deadlock ensued, with endless circular arguments between a few loud individuals, making up maybe 5% of the people there. At one point I made the suggestion that a general measure of opinion be taken, not a vote, but a show of hands to see what the general 'temperature' was, given that the vast majority of people were having no input into what is supposed to be an emancipating process. I was fairly forcefully put down by an older member of this unofficial core group, who claimed that I didn't understand consensus decision making and that such procedures create majorities and minorities of opinion, despite the obvious fact that such divisions were already evident. The facilitator, knowing this guy and not me, moved the discussion away from this suggestion and it carried on in the same fruitless way until after I had to leave to do watch duty.

I was informed afterwards that the "consensus" agreed on was that the dogs and travellers wouldn't be asked to leave, that they wouldn't have to keep the dogs inside their vehicles, but that they'd have to have to keep them "discreet". Here the consensus decision making process failed miserably to deliver its stated benefits. Rather than emancipating all participants, the majority were excluded and wearied by the intransigence of a minority. Rather than bringing about an equitable solution, it led to the lowest common denominator winning out, against the will of the majority of people.

What happened was clearly an example of minority decision making. An insistent group, seeking to defend the pre-existing lack of collective position and to prevent the decision making body from taking decisive action, stopped the majority of people who didn't want to give the police a reason to evict them from acting. The way to deal with the situation was simple: a vote. A vote would of allowed full participation of all, and a binding decision being brought about. Instead, the inability to come to a conclusion showed the ease with which the procedure could be manipulated.

This leads to a more general set of criticisms, which I believe illustrate why "consensus" decision making is prone to manipulation, elitism and minority decision-making. Through a naïve view of how elitism and coercion function, proponents of consensus decision making often bring about the very things they claim to be precluding.

One of the main 'merits' argued by its proponents is that whereas other forms of collective decision making invariably produce minorities and majorities of opinion, consensus brings about a decision which incorporates the desires of all. In fact, what usually happens is that a small group proposes something, a small minority input amendments, a few others disagree, and the motion passes if there are no blocks – decisions coming about if they are not 'blocked'. During the course of the process, the majority of the people there sit or stand, contributing vaguely with some waved hands and not having any real say in the process. One reason for this is a lack of confidence on the part of many, who may well not know the environment or the participants and feel reticent about projecting themselves. It is also a constant of my experience that these kinds of meetings are dominated by men. A naïve belief that because power relations are not institutionalised they are non-existent isn't uncommon. When they are fairly obvious, they are often fobbed off with ideological platitudes. A core (often predominantly male) group usually dominates 'discussions', which in turn intimidates others from

interjecting into the process. When the only form of dissent at the critical point of the process is to 'block' it altogether as an individual, or 'stand aside' effectively resigning, many people are put off from contributing their doubts meaningfully. There is a strong moral pressure put on dissenting parties to stop 'holding up' proceedings and preventing 'consensus'. Thus a uniformity of false 'consensus' arises.

On the other hand, were a vote to be taken at this stage groups can be visibly and collectively enfranchised as supporting or opposing a position. An individual intimidated by the environment can easily enough raise a hand, and as part of a group behind a position, their dissent is removed from their projected personality. Moreover, one vote for one participant means an equality of power, undermining the dominance of the loudest voices. Critically, it relies on a majority clearly saying 'yes', rather than on no-one firmly saying 'no'. And, as we have established, it is also a more viable form of decision-making for dealing with serious controversies.

Additionally, 'facilitators' should be replaced with elected and recallable chairs. In nearly every instance of 'consensus' decision making I have participated in, the facilitator has been someone comfortable enough in the environment to volunteer themselves. This is almost always someone familiar with the core 'movers' in the campaign or at the site, people who have an organisational role which pre-dates the decision making processes altogether. Though they cannot make decisions, they can easily mould discussions and force through 'consensus' by marginalising arguments and so on. An institutional safeguard against such elitism should be put in place. Chairs should propose why they are less implicated in certain groups, and why they can offer a less subjective stance than others. They should be elected by a clear majority (say two thirds) and be recallable if they are clearly favouring one position or certain individuals in the discussion. This does not stop them from supporting and being supported by the dominant position, but it