

Perspectives

Lobbying and protesting are two ways of voicing displeasure at government policy, as Richard Shrubb explains



We feel that work capability assessments have gone too far. They were originally put in place to prevent benefit fraud but the way they are carried out is so severe that those found capable of work are often honest people who are genuinely disabled with mental health problems," says Denise McKenna of the Mental Health Resistance Network (MHRN).

Many disabled people feel they are getting kicked in the teeth by successive governments that believe what they read in the right-wing press rather than the facts and figures the civil service provides them. There are two stages to redress – lobbying and protest.

Lobbying is the most important first step. Lobbying is basically talking to politicians and their aides in the hope of convincing them to change policy. The MHRN is mounting a letter-writing campaign to ministers and influential MPs. Simon Hughes is a key Liberal Democrat MP whose constituency happens to be where McKenna lives – he'll be getting a full postbag...

McKenna again; "we just want to get this on the agenda and talk face-to-face with those who make the decisions." Lobbying, as discussed in my January column, works – and the mental health movement has some effective lobbyists.

I come from a particularly militant background – the green movement. Greenpeace invaded the Prime Minister's country residence at Chequers in 1996. The then French president Jacques Chirac was there while his country was conducting nuclear weapons tests in the Pacific. Greenpeace had been hard at work at the UN and the EU trying to stop the French by any means they could through the machinery of government. It failed, so people like me had a jaunt to Oxfordshire where we got to break into Chequers, get chased by mounted police and bitten by attack dogs – it was great fun! But the Pacific aroll Mururoa still got nuked.

We made the headlines, but the French won. Protest is a measure of last resort after lobbying. The issue is that so many voices are clamouring for attention that our 'representatives' don't know whom to listen to. The MHRN will protest, but only once they have been totally shut up and ignored by those in power. A wider

reaching organisation is the Disabled Action Network and the group Disabled People Against the Cuts. They are all linked to major disability groups such as, in our case, the National Survivor User Network, Mind and Rethink. The big three here all have contacts in the halls of power, and are fighting hard on our behalf. We don't see them at it because a beer with an MP in Annie's Bar in the Palace of Westminster is not newsworthy – but it gets results.

When people think of protest they think of students rioting. Riots often turn the press against the protesters, and guess who reads the press? The ministers making the decisions... Gandhi hit the mark at the turn of the 20th century with what he called Satyagraha – civil disobedience, known now as non-violent direct action. Satyagraha surprised the British in India who responded by shooting protestors, which hastened our withdrawal from the subcontinent thanks to the international outcry.

Using peaceful civil disobedience is an effective means of confrontation because any heavy-handedness and the police get negative publicity. With the police being instruments of state, the government suffers.

Put simply, if you and your mates are sat having a chimpanzee's tea party on Westminster Bridge in the middle of the road then the police can't do anything heavy-handed to stop you. They can't gas you, they can't baton you – you're being peaceful. If you're intent on staying where you are then 'kettling' isn't going to work! Meanwhile, much of London stops because a bunch of lunatics are making their point.

The green movement could teach us a lot about political stunts. They are fun, make headlines and only cost as much as the police spend in their response. We would have been thrown out of our group if we were violent. We even had training where we were dragged along by our hair in some pain, but failed the course if we responded with a punch.

In Cairo, the anti-government protestors policed themselves and refuted violence. If they'd been violent then the government may have had an excuse to quash it, as other governments in the region have with violent insurrection – by peaceful demonstration governments fall.

We as a group, in concert with the rest of those who feel the same way, could make the UK ungovernable, and perhaps ensure change is made in our favour. ■



Richard Shrubb is a freelance journalist and media consultant. Email shrubb@diomedia.co.uk

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Mental Health Resistance Network. Note to practitioners – the MHRN are looking for support from the likes of the Royal College of Nursing, BASW and Royal College of Psychiatrists. Get in touch and they'd love to speak to you. <http://mentalhealthresistance.org> or email: oliver@houn@gmail.com

Disabled Action Network (DAN). Find them on Facebook.

Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC). Also have a Facebook Group.

Perspectives alternates with the Network column from the National Survivor User Network. It provides an individual service user view of the world.