

Ben Niblett, Political Engagement stream: Summary

Christians can engage with politics and can have an impact when we do, but we can lose battles as well as winning them.

Here are some lessons for us from three different campaigns.

1) Jubilee 2000, the campaign to cancel the unpayable debts of the world's poorest countries to celebrate the Millennium.

- Victory is possible - we won \$130b of debt cancellation. Uganda made primary education free for each child.
- Victory is never complete - that wasn't everything we asked for.
- The church can provide a narrative for a wider movement - this one was based on the Leviticus and Deuteronomy Jubilee laws.
- Framing the story well is vital, and killer stats are one good way (Jubilee's stat that the UK received £9 in debt payments for each £1 we sent in aid was clear and hit home).
- Churches are havens of social capital. They're places where community meets in an organised, permanent way, and this stands out more as it gets rarer.
- Churches are places where values are made, so they're well placed to join and lead values-based movements.
- Politicians are influenced by numbers of people, depth of passion, and length of persistence, and also by intellectual argument.

2) The fuel protests in 2000. Gordon Brown had a 'fuel escalator' where he'd pledged to increase tax on petrol and diesel by more than inflation each year; in 2000 lorry firms protested against this by blockading oil refineries and causing fuel shortages. Brown changed the policy soon afterwards.

- Politicians often form strong impressions from small evidence. It was a short episode but many politicians concluded that the environmental movement's support was small and shallow because they didn't see a strong counter-campaign quickly mobilise in favour of higher fuel duty.
- Impressions last. For many years later politicians said 'where were you?' to environmental campaigners.
- Agility is vital. NGOs and churches are often bad at being agile, because we're short of capacity and already have many activities planned, so it's harder to switch suddenly to something else. We need to prepare for quick responses.
- You can't always choose your battles. Fuel duty was justified in environmental terms and was a moderately useful environmental policy, but wasn't top of many green groups' lists - however it became a symbolic issue.

3) The Scottish independence referendum. We often expect people to be apathetic and disengaged from politics, but the Scotland referendum got 97% of the voting age population to register to vote, an 85% turnout, and led to Labour being reduced to one Scottish MP after nearly a century of electoral dominance.

- Big changes are possible.
- It's possible to envision people to want things to be significantly better - a politics of hope can be powerful.
- The Westminster bubble are more out of touch than they realise.
- This is a new political era in many ways, with new opportunities for environmental wins, but also the risk of climate and the environment becoming a polarised political issue, and losing the relative consensus of recent years.