*NGOs AT THE CROSSROADS*

*The Oxford Research Centre for Humanities, University of Oxford, July 2015*

The Evolution and Collapse of Third-Sector Values:

The Centre for Alternative Technology after 40 years

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*This article will be presented largely in the first person. From 1983 to 2013 I was employed by its principal subject, the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT). From 1983-1993 I lived as part of the associated living-community. It is sometimes said that CAT exists in the borderlands of two metaphorical nations, ‘Academia’ and ‘Bohemia’. I regarded myself (metaphorically) as having dual nationality, both inhabiting/owning the fundamental ideas and subjecting them to analysis and criticism.*

The Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) was founded in 1974. It is unusual in several ways

* It tried to match its radical aims with equally radical ways of conducting itself.
* It spans the entire period since the great expansion of ‘counter-cultural’ NGOs in the 1970s, and still exists
* It is located in a specific site that has itself influenced developments
* It avoided dependence on external funding for revenue income, so shares many aspects of ‘social enterprises’

This paper concentrates on the first of these distinctive features, with emphasis on the tensions between ideals and practice, up to a sharp change in 2010. Key words and concepts are **emboldened** at random.

The rise of post-war institutional dissidence

CAT was part of the wave of dissident and ‘alternative’ patterns emerging in the 60s and early 70s. Culturally and stylistically these contrasted with the pre-existing civil society institutions, which included (for example) political parties, sports clubs, the Scouting movement and the Boys Brigade, armed forces cadets, the Womens Institute, Working Men’s Clubs, Trade Unions, St John’s Ambulance organisation, Youth Clubs, angling, fox-hunting, church organisations, and so on.

Such mainstream institutions became paralleled, and partially eclipsed by, a wide range of activities and organisations initiated largely by young people, such as rock festivals, city farms, squatting, paganism, free schools, communes, neo-primitivism, garage bands, widespread use of recreational drugs, relaxed sexual constraints, ‘voluntary simplicity’, meditation and so on (see for example Saunders, 1970, 1975). On the political side, we see the rise of anarchism (Ward, 1973), radical decentralism (Kohr, 1957) and ‘the new left’ (Oglesby, 1969; Cohn-Bendit, 1969; see also critics of the latter: Lindbeck, 1971; Lenin, 1975).

Up to the late 60s it could be argued that western society was characterised by received structures and hierarchies, and that the ‘alternative’ movement emerged as a reaction, celebrating freedom, spontaneity, equality, individuality, and lack of authority (Roszak, 1970; Turner, 2006). In some respects it could be seen as a kind of democratisation of the upper-class ‘**Bohemian**’ values originating in the 19th century (Murger, 1988), newly permitted by widespread affluence. **Anti-authoritarianism** was a particularly important value, having pervasive and long-lasting effects (Bookchin, 1971).

At precisely the same time as this implicit cultural critique of Western society is developing, a *physical* critique was emerging in the form of the modern environmental movement. Its argument was that in the short-term economic externalities were under-appreciated (Mishan, 1967) and in the longer-term the physical and technical trajectories were (as we would now say) *unsustainable* (Vogt, 1948; Bookchin, 1962; Goldsmith, 1972; Meadows *et al*., 1972). Various schools of environmentalism emerged, among them a group focusing on the development of **technology** as a key driver of unsustainable trends (Ellul, 1964, Mumford, 1967).

The ‘technological schools’ argued that technology (and to a lesser extent, science) should not be left to develop in an uncontrolled fashion, but should be subject to rules and limitations (Schumacher, 1972; Harper and Eriksson, 1972; Illich, 1973; Easlea, 1974; Dickson,1974; Boyle and Harper, 1976).

All the foregoing sets the scene for the foundation of CAT, legally in 1973, but with actual operations beginning in 1974, in an abandoned slate quarry in west Wales (in fact the whole organisation was often known colloquially as ‘The Quarry’).

In what follows I will pick out some themes for comment, illustrating the internal dynamics of the organisation, and the unavoidable conflicts and tensions. I am particularly interested in the collision of ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ values. These themes have been subject to strong influences in terms of the Great Debates of the time, as summarised in Table 1.

In proceeding to further description and analysis it is often difficult to give accessible references because the records (such as they) are largely in the minds of the participants and *un*-recorded. Having said this, a remarkable oral history project has been conducted by my colleague Allan Shepherd, and this has captured a great deal of useful material in the form of audio recordings, a book and a useful summary article (Shepherd, 2015, in press). Allan Shepherd and I have also partially catalogued a large quantity of historic documents about CAT, now deposited at the National Library of Wales and available for inspection. In addition, I myself wrote a ‘slim volume’ of historical records and commentary about twenty years ago (Harper, 1995), comparing events at CAT with those in the wider society. It is itself now a historical document.

THE FOUNDER

CAT was founded essentially through the activities of one person, Gerard Morgan-Grenville (1931-2009). He arranged various legal documents, set up a board of trustees, found the site and secured a lease. He had what might be called a ‘working vision’, evolving over time and expressed in a number of documents. These were influential but not considered to be binding.

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| Table 1: **EXTERNAL INFUENCES ON CAT PRACTICE** |
| SOURCE | EXAMPLE OF PRINCIPLE OR PRACTICE | REFERENCE |
| ‘Traditional’ socialism/Workers Cooperative movement | Needs-based pay structure; later, flat wage structure; erosion of work/life boundaries | Marx (1875); Vanek (1970);Goodman and Goodman (1960) |
| Anarchism/New Left | Consensus decision-making;Gradual reduction of powers of Director; Rotated tasks | Bookchin (1971); Kropotkin (1974); Debord (1970) |
| Communities/communes movement | Residential community with shared fuel, purchases and mealtimes | Communes Movement (1971); Advisory Service for Squatters (1976) |
| Alternative Technology | Persistent attempts to generate on-site energy from renewable sources | Harper and Eriksson (1972). *Undercurrents* 1972-80. |
| Self-sufficiency movement | Shared livestock: pigs, poultry, goats; strenuous efforts to capture on-site resources | Seymour and Seymour (1973); Rivers (1978). |
| Standard ‘pollution environmentalism’ | Early conversions for lead-free engines; prohibition of treated timber (Cr, As); prohibition of MDF (formaldehyde); composting toilets. | Mathews (1977); Borer and Harris (1998); Harper (1999) |
| Human population school of environmentalism | Capping of needs-based wage allowance at two children | Ehrlich (1969); Parsons (1971) |
| Apocalyptic environmentalism | Expectation of social collapse; simplified systems that can be repaired and maintained with local or ‘scavengeable’ resources | Platt (1969); Paddock and Paddock (1967); Meadows *et al*., (1972); Turner (2006) |
| Organic movement | Agricultural chemicals unused across entire site; registration for Soil Association symbol status; strong emphasis on compost | Howard (1940); Hills (1971) Harper (1994) |
| Animal rights/sustainable agriculture | Vegetarian meals for staff and restaurants | Lappe (1971);Mellanby (1975); Katzen (1977) |
| Biodynamic agriculture/Anthroposophy | Planting crops with reference to lunar cycles; use of ‘flow-forms’ for water conditioning | Pfeiffer (1938); Schwenk (1996) |
| Food reform | ‘Whole-food’ principles adopted for staff meals, public restaurants | Hauser (1952); Bircher (1967); Canter, Canter and Swann (1982) |
| Feminism | Women staff granted indefinite leave for representation at Greenham Common | Millett (1970); Piercy (1976) |
| ‘New Age’ | Minute’s Silence before a meeting;Meditation hut; pest control by mental attitudes; use of medium to communicate with livestock | Findhorn Community (2008); Ferguson (1980); Russell (1983); Caddy (1992) |

There was no ‘constitution’ as such, and for many years it remained unclear who could legitimately make decisions, and about what. This was a common feature of

 ‘alternative’ organisations of that time (compare for example, Landry *et al*., 1985). However, the general understanding seemed to be this:

* that the Founder would not actually live continuously on the site (he had in addition many other threads in his life (Morgan-Grenville, 2001));
* that he would allow the active residents to conduct their own affairs; but…
* that he reserved the right to step in and make executive decisions if absolutely necessary.

This pattern was observed during the first year, but gradually faded as the organisation developed its own identity, becoming unthinkable by (say) year 10.

PHASES OF ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We can identify several distinct ‘phases’ in the evolution of the organisation, that must have similarities with many other NGOs, and indeed conventional business enterprises, which must continually re-invent themselves in the face of changed market conditions. These are summarised in Table 2.

 It is worth bearing in mind that there was surprisingly little consensus about the true purpose of the project, or how it should be pursued. Individuals had their own ideas, and often simply assumed everyone else shared them. The differences could easily be concealed on a day-to-day basis, but would become explicit at moments of crisis. It should also be remembered that, of course, at any given time those on the ground can have no idea of what is yet to come. They might well feel they are ‘part of a drama’, but it is one whose script they are writing themselves.

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| PHASE | LABEL | PERIOD | STAFF NUMBER |
| I | **Preparation** | **Pre-1974** |  |
| II | **Reconnaissance** | **Jan-April 1974** | **Variable 2-10** |
| III | **Germination** | **April 1974 to June 75** | **Variable 5-25** |
| IV | **Consolidation** | **1975-88** | **Grew 30-40** |
| V | **Expansion** | **1989-2002** | **Grew 40-80** |
| VI | **High-water mark** | **2002-2009** | **Grew 80-150** |
| VII | **Retrenchment** | **2010-** | **Shrunk 150-50** |
|  |  |  |  |

Table 2: Summary of historical phases in the development of CAT. Apparent mystical, historicist or Shakespearian allusions are not intended.

**Phase I** was necessary legal preparation. A new charitable organisation was created with four Trustees, friends of the Founder, who played no further part. The site was sought, found, and leased for 99 years at a peppercorn rent. A ‘manager’ was appointed, on very basic pay.

A substantial no-strings, one-off grant was donated by the Founder’s brother, equivalent to about £100,000 in today’s money. In retrospect, this was one of a handful of ‘crucial enabling factors’ that allowed the organisation to escape early failure. Others include the special qualities of the founder himself and the fact that the project happened to be in a tourist area, key to Phase IV.

**Phase II** might be described as ‘reconnaissance’. The manager arrived on the site alone in February 1974, with no accommodation but with access to the founding fund. He was quickly joined by a few others, mostly volunteers.

A diary kept in 1974 shows a clear split in the basic conception, especially between two strong-minded protagonists, prefiguring a fundamental and continuing source of tension (Harper, 1989). The two incompatible tendencies are these:

* Using the site’s seclusion to create a protected zone in which the purity of the conception can be explored in a carefully controlled manner
* Vigorous expansion and engagement with the wider society, opening up to public and commercial interests

The resolution was telling. The Founder stepped in and dismissed *both* protagonists, then appointed another manager with a brief to try and develop the site along ‘self-sufficiency’ lines. This led to

**Phase III**, which could be described as ‘germination’ (in analogy with that part of a plant’s life when it is growing but still dependent on stored food energy in the seed). The task was to create a self-sustaining organisation before the initial grant funding ran out.

In fact, during the first year, funded largely by the seed- grant, a considerable amount was achieved, including

* + Clean piped water supply from the existing reservoir
	+ Sanitation using chemical or composting toilets
	+ A basic electricity system using hydropower and wind, with propane backup
	+ Stoves for heating, albeit using coal, supplied by the nearest neighbour, a coal merchant
	+ Reliable mass catering using bottled propane gas
	+ Refurbished existing cottages and static caravans for accommodation
	+ Large refurbished industrial shed used for all communal purposes
	+ A token amount of food production

All this was reminiscent of a refugee camp or post-disaster situation, with a curious mix of completely standard technologies and a great deal of ingenuity and make-do-and-mend. For example, although it is not possible to have a pre-industrial electricity system, the hydro set and generator were ‘rescued’ from a nearby farm; the wind turbines were either donated, or hand-made versions of the ‘Cretan’ cloth-sail design using recycled car parts for gearing and electricity production; backup electricity was provided by a propane-powered A-Series (Morris Minor) engine. And so on.

This was all helped by the Founder’s industrial connections. He was able to secure a great deal of material in kind, for example window glass, cement, and—which always raises a smile—a year’s supply of digestive biscuits. He also had high-society connections, and astonishingly persuaded the Duke of Edinburgh to visit the site during the first year, providing instant respectability in the eyes of sceptical neighbours, matched by amused derision on the part of metropolitan purists (Boyle, 1974).

However, it became increasingly obvious that the goal of ‘self-sufficiency’ was not so easy as many had imagined. It was (and probably still is) a common illusion among romantic urbanites dreaming of ‘The Good Life’ (Nearing and Nearing, 1960) that if push comes to shove a group of people can live on next to nothing and provide all their own basic needs without outside inputs. But of course, they cannot. In fact modern people cannot even get close, and I can say this on the basis of a lifetime of experience.

The project was clearly unsustainable unless some regular sources of income could be found. The response that emerged was to turn the site partially into a kind of theme-park and hope that visitors would be willing to pay an entrance fee. In July of Year 2 this idea was tested and it worked remarkably well, aided by the fact that the CAT site happens to be in tourist area, and in those days there was not much else for holidaymakers to do. The organisation and its site are still best known to the wider public as a **visitor attraction**.

This process started **Phase IV**: vigorous growth of the now-self-sustaining ‘seedling’, and a period of consolidation that lasted for about 13 years. **Entrance fees** were the largest single element of the income stream, and of course visitors also bought meals and books and signed up for courses. Visitor numbers built up to about 50,000 a year.

During the rest of CAT’s existence, a number of other ways have been found that express, or communicate, CAT’s messages while at the same time generating revenue. This is an important notion for many NGOs. Examples at CAT include

* Running an on-site shop selling ‘eco’ goods
* A mail order wing of the shop
* An on-site restaurant selling wholefood vegetarian meals
* A shop in the nearby town selling whole foods
* Running environmental courses for schools, universities and the general public
* A consultancy service, advising on ‘green’ energy, building, sanitation etc
* Manufacturing electronic controls for small-scale renewable energy systems
* Hiring large spaces for functions such as conferences and weddings, providing a politically and environmentally sound ‘green ambience’.

Such activities continued from 1975-1988 and saw steady development. The organisation established a unique niche within the environmental movement, but found itself confronted by a nagging question: shouldn’t we be doing more? Were we not rather stuck in a dead end? After all, visitor numbers had remained static for many years. Should we, could we, find funds for a massive expansion? After a long period of internal debate, the organisation discovered an effective **consensus for growth**.

We might call this **Phase V**, deliberate expansion (Harper, 1991). Between 1988 and 1993, the organisation

* Raised £1 million through an ‘ethical share issue’
* Built a water-balanced **funicular railway** to carry visitors dramatically up to the site from the car-park
* Connected part of the site to the mains electricity supply
* Reconstructed the grounds and public displays
* Upgraded the water-supply system using passive techniques
* Built a new waste-treatment system to collect and process dirty water
* Spun off two enterprises ‘incubated’ on the site

Broadly this process was successful in maintaining greater activity through the 1990s, and culminated in the construction of a large two-storey public building made largely of rammed earth, which could boast that it contained not a single shovelful of Portland cement, normally considered indispensable to modern building. The organisation was beginning to home in on a useful operational definition of **alternative technology**: functional structures and devices with around 80% low-tech components complemented by around 20% high-tech ‘industrial vitamins’. This reverses conventional practice.

But by the end of that period it was again becoming obvious that some activities were less viable, notably the mail-order business, in its heyday our largest cash-cow, but now eroded by the internet. Further, visitors numbers were in decline as British holidaymakers (apparently) chose warmer, sunnier locations.

Once again, a crisis threatened, and once again, a controversial new possibility opened up, leading to **Phase VI**, a high point in terms of staff numbers and turnover. In the early years of the new millennium, higher education was booming in the UK, in particular taught postgraduate (masters) level courses, which were receiving very generous financial support from the UK government. CAT established an entirely new institution known as the **Graduate School of the Environment** (GSE) to deliver higher degrees. When you compare this with the fragile bricolage of 1974, it is a remarkable development.

The GSE formed a partnership with one of the London universities to teach postgraduate architecture courses on the site. The courses were delivered in a ‘pulsed’ format, with students attending once a month and staying five or six days.

This format was very successful, appealing in particular to older students able to manage some days away every month, and numbers quickly built up to around 100 per cohort. We started a second master’s course on renewable energy, using mostly CAT staff. The response from prospective students was so strong that we decided to start fundraising for a major new building to house all the new activity. In due course the funds were in place and work on the building – known as WISE, the **Wales Institute for Sustainable Education** – began. It was eventually completed, but for a wide variety of reasons, it saw the initiation of…

**Phase VII**, a radical reduction of activity, income and staff and reversion to a more conventional organisational structure. Over this period, with apologies, I will draw a veil, simply because no actual documentation is available. Phase VII continues, and who can say where it will lead? The curious may visit the CAT web site and see how things are panning out ([www.cat.org.uk](http://www.cat.org.uk)), although it is perhaps fair to say that great efforts seem to be made, to maintain the impression that organisationally things are just as they always were. This itself is significant: the ‘myth of CAT’ as a self-organising entity was recognised as an important part of the ‘CAT brand’ even when the myth was palpably false.

Figure 1. Changes of 'weight' for different kinds of activities to 2012, normalised to 100%. The depth of the areas is based on a mixture of staff numbers and cash flow.

This completes a broad overview of the trajectory of CAT over 40 years, summarised in Figure 1. It is a story of repeated crises overcome, leading eventually to a partial collapse that might well have been terminal. During most of this period the organisation was run in a very democratic fashion, with a sophisticated system of collective management, and I will now turn to looking at how this evolved.

ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

In its founding year, CAT was technically highly *dirigiste*, with the Founder having a controlling veto on almost everything. Theoretically he reported to the Trustees, but they were his appointees and they left him to it.

However, it seemed very important that the whole enterprise be *alternative*. At the time this implied a rejection of all and any forms of authority. But of course, everybody was feeling their way, and nobody quite knew how to do it. The Founder, Gerard Morgan-Grenville, certainly did not want to destroy the delicate learning process, so he tended to operate as a behind the scenes facilitator, fixing things up and doing deals, using his contacts and influence. He allowed the appointed on-site manager to conduct affairs as he (the manager) saw fit.

But of course, the manager *himself* was trying to establish what ‘alternative’ meant in organisational terms, often having to deal with extremely chaotic personal situations. One unavoidable feature of the time was the constant arrival of new people, some just to look and chat, some to offer a bit of help, some bringing gifts (not always needed or wanted) some to come and join the project There were geniuses, oddballs, freeloaders, drug-fuelled hippies, retired engineers, the possessed and the dispossessed. The Asperger-Autistic spectrum in particular was richly represented. It is extremely hard to explain to a newcomer all that needs explaining, while trying assess their suitability as a temporary or permanent participant.

The antipathy to rules and structure, however, meant that there was no clear control on who should be involved in decision-making. The presumption was ‘**consensus**’ – complete group agreement – and consensus was often thrashed out round a table late at night. But what emerged was the consensus of all who happened to be there *that night*. A few days later it could be quite a different group of people, so ‘policy’ could lurch drunkenly from one extreme to another.

Gradually this comical pattern stabilised in an informal core group of relatively long-serving staff, who wrote agendas, convened meetings, noted opinions and provided a framework of Due Process. People unconsciously came to accept their place in an implied hierarchy, and of course there was a lot of simple ‘learning how to do it’ (Polanyi, 1958). Even itinerant strangers learned to Know Their Place.

In Year 2, the Founder decided that, rather than a manager, a **Director** be appointed for a five-year period, with the implication of strong deputed powers. The first Director, nevertheless, found he could not simply lay down the law, but needed to behave essentially as a coordinator of group views. In subsequent years, this Director extended his legitimacy by means of a small group of three, elected by secret ballot to deal with sensitive personnel matters. This started a long process of thinking and debate about the ideal constitution for the organisation. Could it be fully ‘alternative’, yet not fall into the ‘Tyranny of Structurelessness’ (Freeman, 1970)?

The weekly meeting

During most of the first five years, numbers were small enough that most matters could be dealt with informally, and as frequently as required. However, some long-lasting patterns emerged, notably the institution of the **weekly meeting of all staff**, very commonly found among NGOs and indeed elsewhere. This has a function of regular updating, sharing information, discussing contentious issues, bonding with colleagues, and imparting legitimacy to decisions. It is in a way, the ‘parliament’. Decisions are minuted and displayed in a public place. This marked the beginning of the body of ‘case law’ on which the implicit constitution rested.

The Overview Group

In Year 5, a new Director was appointed by the Founder, having previously been in charge of Friends of the Earth in Birmingham. It is worth remarking that there are ‘alternative careers’ in which individuals move around between Third Sector organisations.

The new Director introduced a new elected general management group of four, ostensibly to advise and support him, but which quickly became a *de facto* board of management, of which he was the chair and convenor. The other previously elected group, dealing only with personnel issues, was wound up. The elected management group was known as the **Overview** Group. Members served for 18 months and were then obliged to stand down, in rotation. This institution survived until 2010.

It was occasionally remarked, that those elected to Overview tended to be older, long-standing members with middle-class backgrounds, not entirely representative of the rank and file. But it was a secret ballot, and we got what the collectivity voted for. Apparently, despite grumbles about ‘the Divine-Righters’, there was widespread support for older, wiser heads.

It was noticed how much more efficient it was to delegate many decisions to a small group, rather than spend a day a week thrashing everything out *en masse*. The Weekly Meeting still took place, but suddenly existed largely to ratify decisions of the Overview Group and impart legitimacy. It was indeed much quicker. However, it became obvious that if all staff are given the opportunity to comment on, or reconsider Overview decisions, many will take it, and it can go on for *hours*. This might be considered a great waste of time, but on the other hand, if Overview minutes are not subject to the scrutiny of all the staff, they cannot be considered ratified or legitimate.

The solution to this dilemma was devastatingly simple. It was decided not to present Overview minutes to the Weekly Meeting, but to post them in a public place for all to read. Anyone who disagreed with an Overview decision simply had to write ‘Objection’ with a signature. This decision would then be frozen and brought to the next Weekly Meeting, when the objector had to make her case – which might or might not be upheld. Decisions with no objections were deemed ratified after seven days. This ‘passive ratification’ became the norm and imparted a sufficient degree of legitimacy.

The key here is that objecting to decisions of elected groups must be made *somewhat* difficult, but not impossible. The onus is placed on habitual objectors (of which any organisation has some) to do most of the work, and they are indeed discouraged. It was ‘nudging’ *avant la lettre* (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

Departments

At this stage in CAT’s history most of the staff were members of functional **departments**, for example engineering, building, gardens, volunteers, education, shop, office, display (etc). Departments are important because they are cost centres, allocated spending/earning budgets, and held to account for meeting them.

Departments were rarely planned but ‘emerged’ as functional units. To give an example, at one time I shared an office with another biologist who was responsible for water, waste-water and sewage treatment (Weedon, 2012). My responsibility was managing the exhibition gardens and composting solid organic waste (Harper, 1994, 2001). After a few months, we realised we were a kind of department, and put a notice on the door. There was never a formal decision, but the following year the Biology Department had its own line in the organisational budget and has done so ever since.

From weekly to monthly all-staff meeting

In Year 12 (still Phase IV) a third Director was appointed, this time not by the founder but by the staff body in a conventional competitive interview process – an important step forward in democratic self-management. The new Director expanded the Overview Group by one, and abolished the Weekly Meeting, replacing it with a Monthly Meeting of the all-staff ‘parliament’ with compulsory attendance. This goes a long way to reconcile efficiency and democracy. The Agenda for the Monthly Meeting would be carefully constructed, and conducted by a chair from a rotating pool of effective chairs. It was still a forum for receiving and evaluating objections to the Overview minutes, but these became much rarer over time.

Crisis tests of the system

Two crisis incidents illustrate the robustness of the collective management system during Phase V. One concerned a cash-flow crisis in late 80s. After an emergency meeting it was decided by consensus that no wages would be paid that month, but that they would be repaid as soon as possible if conditions allowed, and a ‘hardship fund’ was set up for those who could not manage without any pay at all. The pay freeze was instituted, the crisis was overcome, and the wages eventually returned as a Christmas bonus.

On another occasion, it became understood that the body of staff (about 40) was too large to be supported by the income. There was no way to increase income in the short run, so the organisation had to ‘lose’ the equivalent of five people. But *which* *five*? A meeting of all staff agreed with the principle, and all agreed that whatever process was used, if dismissal fell upon them personally they would accept it without demur. A special elected group was set up to make the decision, on the understanding that they themselves were not exempt. Eventually the decision was taken, and the chosen five did indeed leave, but did not feel victimised or arbitrarily dismissed. Indeed, they left with considerable honour.

A failed experiment

Members of the Overview Group were elected in rotation from the general body of staff, and anybody could stand. Voters could exercise a measure of control over the composition of the group by noting the qualities of the other three members and electing someone complementary. But questions were raised whether this would invariably represent all parts of the organisation fairly. Would it not be better, perhaps, for different sectors of the organisation to send their own delegates, as happens in Trades Unions or political parties? It is supposed to be very democratic: after all, delegates can be instructed, and they can be recalled.

This is superficially a good idea, but it required that departments be grouped into four functional clusters. Two were obvious: ‘Technical’, which included engineering and building, and ‘Trading’, which included the various shops and restaurants, Mail Order etc. But the other two were simply ragbags. Nevertheless, this process was carried out and suddenly the Overview Group consisted of ‘delegates’ from the four groups.

The result was fascinating. As ‘delegates’, the new members felt they should press the interests of their own ‘constituencies’, rather than acting in the interests of the entire organisation. Very soon the group broke into vying factions with the Director powerless to prevent ‘the tail wagging the dog’.

It was a nasty moment, and after a few showdowns the experiment was abandoned. The system reverted to elections from the general body of staff, as before.

Approaching Dunbar’s Number

The general trend across three Directors had been to reduce the relative power of the director. The fourth Director decided the role was not needed, and by 2000 there was no director at all. You might say we had had four periods of ‘constitutional monarchy’ and suddenly, a republic. Was this the ultimate triumph of socialist democracy? Not so fast!

In the early 00’s CAT was expanding rapidly, and by 2005 had reached 150. Members of the Overview group, although increased to 5, were all amateur managers still with departmental responsibilities, and experiencing considerable overwork. After all, they not only had to take the decisions but were responsible for making sure they were implemented, and evaluating the results. It has been argued that a group size of 150 is about the limit that a human brain can keep direct track of, and this has been dubbed ‘Dunbar’s number’ after the anthropologist who first hypothesised it (Dunbar, 1998; see also Gladwell, 2000).

It did indeed seem more than could be coped with by part-time managers. Something more streamlined and efficient appeared to be necessary. After a very long period of discussion and draft proposals, it was decided that we needed a model like a local government, with permanent ‘civil servants’ directed by an elected body – like the Overview Group, but this time with a dedicated body of implementers and enforcers to carry out its will.

All this was a far cry from the artless anarchism of the 70s, but it says much about the changed mood and ethos that many staff enthusiastically embraced the prospect of ‘proper, **professional managers**’ who (it was fondly imagined) would be able to organise things far better than we had been able to do ourselves.

The Melt-Down

It is possible the reorganisation could have worked, but the organisation was in serious financial straits. It could not afford to employ ‘proper, professional managers’ but only people like ourselves, on the same basic wages, but without the ethos and without the long experience of running an NGO like CAT. It was set to end in tears, and it did.

One very striking observation, paralleling processes in national and local government, was that the new managers, ostensibly the servants of the elected authority, tended to make their own decisions on the hoof, becoming a new focus of power, which they often exercised in a clumsy and insensitive manner, severely damaging morale and solidarity. Essentially, as so often, the bureaucrats took over.

The events of the recent past are often hard to make sense of, so a summary must do. Very broadly, a series of difficult circumstances arose in quick succession, overwhelming the organisation’s ability to cope, either financially or organisationally. Any management system would have struggled, but the process of changing the system, with new players involved, made it even more difficult.

Eventually, total collapse threatened. At this point the **Trustees** intervened. All charitable organisations require a body of Trustees who are legally liable for ensuring financial probity and compliance with charity law. Normally the Trustees have a background watching brief and are not actively involved in running an organisation; that had been true of CAT’s Trustees also. But at this juncture their hand was forced. They appointed an accountant to inspect the accounts, who found a financial ‘black hole’ of debt unrecognised by the existing Finance Department, which had clearly been out of its depth.

The choice appeared to be: wind up the organisation, or convince lenders to extend credit, who demanded (effectively) martial law. The Trustees opted for the latter. The constitution was suspended; the accountant was appointed CEO with absolute powers (and with what seemed a colossal salary); some departments were simply closed; the on-site living community was disbanded; large numbers of staff were declared redundant, others on reduced hours; zero-hour contracts became the norm; there were no negotiations or consultations; the decision-making process was totally opaque.

A new, much more conventional, hierarchical structure emerged, with large pay differentials. It is in some respects the opposite of what CAT had aimed for in organisational terms, yet it was still able to deliver its ‘alternative products’ in terms of courses and demonstrations. Was this outcome inevitable in the end?

PAY STRUCTURE

Like any organisation, CAT must balance the partition of its income into wages and running costs. Wages too high and the operation stumbles, risking the project and everyone’s job. Wages too low and staff cannot survive, some leave, and it is hard to recruit. Since the staff are both management *and* workers they necessarily see it from both sides. It is an unusual situation.

Pay is often a difficult area, particularly with respect to differentials, because people often tend to use pay-levels as a gauge of value and status within an organisation. Of course, CAT was not exempt from such effects, but at the same time it had to deal with a huge ideological commitment to fairness and equality.

The principle of equality is particularly tested with respect to highly skilled staff, perhaps older people, already with children and mortgages. Are these necessarily excluded from the project? Is that fair? Is it consistent with the project’s aims?

Some ‘fudges’ are unavoidable to reconcile irreconcilables. In Phase III many skilled staff arrived with savings and /or survived on earnings from a spouse with a conventional job. Others with private means accepted a status like unpaid interns today. Others were given allowances along with free board and lodging on the site.

Needs-based pay

During Phase IV there was much discussion about regularising the wages system, and it was felt the basic principle should be the *ur*-socialist “from each according to their abilities; to each according to their needs” (Marx, 1875). An elaborate system was concocted that combined objective needs such as mortgages (for those who lived off the site) and children, with more subjective measures of ability from both self-assessment and peer-evaluation.

However, this system proved far too cumbersome and contentious, and eventually it was replaced by a much coarser definition of ‘needs’: mortgages, and the number of children – albeit capped at two, in acknowledgement of the ‘population problem’ (Parsons, 1971).

Pay Parity

The simplified ‘needs-based’ system was regularly attacked by those living on the site itself, who argued that ‘mortgages’ were a form of personal savings that the organisation should not pay for. And by the childless, who argued that having children was a kind of lifestyle choice and should not be encouraged. Many arguments later, in Phase V, it was finally decided to move to *pay parity*: that all permanent staff would be paid the same. The three arrangements are summarised in the Table 3, adjusted to 2012 prices (Harper, 1995).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1978 | 1985 | 1995 |
|  | Needs based | Children only | ‘Parity’ |
| Basic | 10,000 | 10,000 | 18700 |
| Mortgage allowance | 2800 | 2200 |  |
| First child | 2800 | 3400 |  |
| Second child | 1400 | 2200 |  |
| Peer assessment | 0-3340 |  |  |
| Special cases | 0-1950 |  |  |
|  Associate staff |  |  | 15500 |
|  Casual staff |  |  | 12000 |
| Minimum wage | 10,000 | 10,000 | 11200 |
| Maximum wage | 22,000 | 20,000 | 18700 |

Table 3: Evolving wage structures at CAT up to 1995.

By 1995 (Phase V) the organisation was more prosperous and able to pay what was at time a fairly standard local wage to permanent staff. There was not enough however, to pay all staff at this rate: by Phase V there was a substantial body of ‘associate’ staff usually carrying out less skilled work, and all manner of casual workers such as our own children selling ice-creams to visitors in the summer. These ‘other ranks’ were paid at a lower rate, and often complained that it broke the headline principle of pay parity. They had a point: it wasn’t literally parity; on the other hand, probably no other organisation in Britain had a maximum wage differential as low as 50%.

 ‘Pay Parity’ created its own forms of *dis*parity. Under this system professions such as engineering and building are grossly underpaid by comparison with the industry norm. Meanwhile others, such as gardening and catering, are *overpaid* by the industry norm. In a truly socialist utopia this should matter at all, but we are all human beings, and over the years it was interesting to note that builders and engineers were in some sense ‘cut more slack’: allowed to make more mess, more readily forgiven for missing a rota, listened to with greater attention in meetings, etc. And they developed a certain swagger. As always, there were hidden hierarchies.

This effect played a part in the ultimate **collapse of pay parity** in Phase VI, perhaps simply a reflection of the *Zeitgeist*. As previously mentioned, a mutually beneficial arrangement was made with one of the London universities to deliver monthly modules for a particular postgraduate course, on-site at CAT rather than in London. The university staff would commute to Wales and deliver half the teaching, CAT staff the other half. This worked well enough, but after a few years, new courses were mooted and it made some sense for the university staff to relocate and become, effectively, part of the CAT staff body. As it happens the university staff were paid at about twice the CAT rate, and there are strict legal (‘TUPE’) rules about the maintenance of Pay and Conditions when staff move to do the same job in a new place.

This posed an acute dilemma. We needed these university staff to run the courses that were providing more than half the organisation’s income. But we had to pay them twice as much as ourselves! Naturally the debates were furious, but in the end, it was accepted that these professional lecturers fell into a slightly different category – the GSE, which could be deemed separate enough from CAT to feel that the principle of Pay Parity was not fatally impugned.

But that was just a stopgap. A further MSc course in the GSE emerged, taught entirely by CAT builders, engineers and architects, all hitherto paid at the CAT parity rate. As we noted above, CAT technical staff were acutely aware of their low pay rates relative to the industry norms. You can guess the rest: eventually they refused to run the new course except on the basis of parity with the other GSE staff: after all (they argued) same work, same pay.

That cracked the dike. The new cadre of managers, not acculturated to the ethos of pay parity, acceded to the demands of the technical lecturers, and to finance the extra pay proceeded to close departments, fire staff, and reduce hours, magnifying the disparities even further. Many excellent staff, working well below their market value for the sake of the organisation’s aims and ethos, resigned in disgust. Morale and solidarity never recovered.

Pay structure in the post-2010 period is considered commercially sensitive and information is not publicly available. It is clear however, that CAT moved to a pattern fairly typical of larger NGOs, with a highly-paid CEO, a small cadre of highly-paid managers, and a larger body of staff paid at a much lower rate. The GSE has its own pay structure, similar to that found in universities.

FURTHER ATTEMPTS TO RECONCILE THEORY AND PRACTICE

Renewable Energy

Renewable energy was always the cornerstone, and became part of the ‘CAT Brand’. Looking back at the 70s, part of the attraction of the project was clearly the idea of something for nothing, or in the words of one text ‘Natural, Endless, Free…’ (Taylor, 1976). Those at the sharp end on the CAT site quickly came to understand that it was not free at all, but on the contrary, difficult and expensive, certainly at this scale and with the technology of the time. It was only managed by dint of brilliant ingenuity on the part of dedicated engineers working essentially for pocket money.

The dilemma was that, to announce this publicly as a ‘result’, would destroy an important recruiting sergeant for new staff, and a fundamental part of ‘the CAT myth’. Somehow everybody knew that the myth needed to be maintained, and everybody colluded in ‘not calling a spade a spade’. It is interesting to note that only now, 40 years on, are renewable sources such as wind and solar, deployed on huge scales with the most advanced technology, starting to achieve economic parity with fossil energy (Ryor and Tawney, 2014).

Nevertheless, CAT tried very hard to self-provision with energy on the site, and occasionally came close to reconciling theory and practice. In the 90s, based on the evidence available on climate change, CAT took the position now held by the UK government, that fossil fuel use needs to be reduced to 20%. At that time electricity imports to the site were about 10% of total usage, and the only direct fuel use was liquefied gas for cooking. All other energy needs were met by water-power, wind, solar and wood. The organisation was, more or less, walking its talk, showing that, in principle, it could be done. The subsequent series of ***Zero-Carbon Britain*** reports (CAT 2007, 2010, 2013) demonstrated that the same was possible for the UK in general, but only on the basis of very large high-tech systems. It is often the case that ‘Small is Beautiful’ (Schumacher, 1972) but (we found) this principle cannot keep the wheels of a modern society turning. Another Holy Cow turned out to grass.

In the new millennium, CAT faced a dramatic expansion of service provision with large new postgraduate courses. Yet of course the site remained the same size. How

could the demand be met with renewable energy? The solution adopted was a very large Combined Heat-and-Power plant using local wood chips as fuel. All resources were committed to this solution, and it was decided to go for a lower-cost experimental British system rather than an established foreign one. The result was in the end a complete failure. The British company folded, revealing endless unsolved technical problems that proved impossible to rectify. Having put all the eggs in this basket, there was nothing left. The operation was forced back into the arms of mains electricity and bulk gas, a terrible humiliation. Remarkably, the Myth requires that it is Not Spoken About. A visit to the CAT web site still leaves an impression that most energy is derived from on-site renewables.

Rotas

I have discussed the principal organisational patterns, but there were many others that arose from the ultra-democratic ethos. One was the operation of ‘**rotas**’ wherein all staff would take turns on tasks it was felt should be shared. These rotas evolved gradually, reaching their apogee in the 1980s with staff numbers at about 40, after which they declined along with Health and Safety legislation and creeping professionalisation.

The principal rotas were:

* Staffing the visitor reception desk (a whole day, one person)
* Cleaning the community kitchen and dining room (weekly, 2 hours, 4 people)
* Cooking lunch (Several hours, one person)
* Making bread (Two hours, one person)
* Acting as ‘Ogre’ and cleaning the public toilets (a week, one person, see below).

The lists were in public places and it was clear when your turn could be expected. ‘Bread-making’ depended on how fast the previous batch had been consumed, so that required some vigilance to see when your turn was due. You could of course arrange ‘swaps’, but nobody was exempt, even the Director.

Rotas helped to maintain the general feeling that ‘we are all the management; we are all the workers’.

The Ogre

The role of ‘**Ogre**’ is very characteristic tool for reconciling ultra-democracy and the need for reliable outcomes. Since Entrance Fees were the principal source of income, the ‘display’ aspect of the site was important and needed managing. The so-called *Ogre* served for one week and was given limitless powers to compel others to address urgent matters relating to the ‘Visitor Experience’. The Ogre would carry out an inspection of the site on Monday morning and convene a meeting of representatives of various key departments. After suitable discussion, she would allocate tasks, and would spend the rest of the week rigorously enforcing compliance with the full support of the general polity.

Being the Ogre was a bit like being The Boss for a week, but potential officiousness was tempered by the simple requirement that the ogre had also to clean and maintain the public toilets during that week.

Structure of the Economy:

During Phase V, it could be said that the economy of CAT was robust, consisting of a large number of ‘slices’ none of which was overly dominant, and with a turnover of around £4 million a year. The pattern for 1998 is shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Pie-chart of income sources for 1998**

However, by 2002 it was clear that ‘tourism’ as a whole (exploded section in Figure 2) was in long-term decline, as was mail-order income, outcompeted by the growth of e-providers. Meanwhile ‘courses’ were expanding rapidly, as shown in Figure 1, and so it was clear that a major shift was needed, hence the GSE, WISE and the rapid expansion of higher education.

In many ways, this is a happy outcome. CAT has not proved terribly good at tourism, or show-business, or selling things, but it is extremely good at teaching, at all levels. So the development of the GSE is probably CAT’s destiny. Sadly, the transition has been much rougher than most that have taken place in the organisation’s history.

CONCLUSIONS

The many difficulties CAT has had in reconciling theory and practice were partly due to its extremely rigorous standards of radical/alternative values. In retrospect, it is tempting to conclude that the task was impossible. Clearly it charted unknown waters, and has much to tell History on that account. But in the end, luck and happenstance, which served it so well in the early days, finally turned against it. Sheer economic gravity asserted its iron claims. Is CAT now, perhaps like most other NGOs, simply a faithful reflection of the times we live in?

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Comments and suggestions

Environmental politics

What kinds of analytic frameworks?

The cause, the organisation, the individual

Need for beguiling illusions

The great Myth

Economic mismatches translating into behavioural patterns

Failure being a normal outcome

Organisational theory/management theory/theory of the firm

Perhaps specifically NGO theory Do they have recognised stages, life-cycles?

Contrast of lifestyles and infrastructure

Contrast of analytic and holistic

Contrast of visionaries and pragmatists

Class structure: bourgeois head-in-airs and proletarian jobsworths; employee capture

Death trap of consensus and egalitarianism – more and more jobsworths

Dilemmas: eco vs fair, different levels of eco

What seems cool, what seems alternative. Presumption on low-tech.

Tolerated inconsistencies

Gradually rising wages, standards, dragged upwards by prevailing tastes

Shove at al and practices: what seems normal

Contrast with other eco-social sites: did it survive better?

Was it more resilient?

Did it crash simply through bad luck?

Sat in both communities and demo-centres, very unusual

Was it *particularly* unusual?

How did it manage itself through the bottleneck?

 Reversion to standard hierarchy

 Large pay differentials

 Standard structures from other institutions, e.g. academic

Did it maintain its core and special products? ZCB and the GSE

Did it have a basic value set? How did official values compare with expressed values

What is formally documented? Pay structure. Organisational structure. Budgetary pies. Telephones, computers, changing technology. Could we have a time line?

The ‘hippie envelope’; contrast of earlier and later values, the CS2 paper

Staff who went on to ‘higher things’ examples

Comparison of apocalyptic sentiment and the Doomsday Clock

General lack of discipline, or sanctions; expectation that many decisions would not be implemented; made just to get a meeting over.