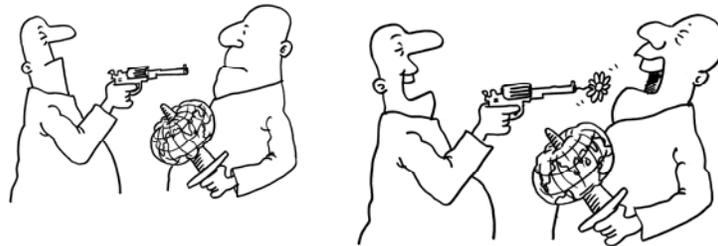


## Have Green Campaigners Changed Their Colour?

*Alison Maitland*

Have pressure groups gone soft on business? Activists who once resorted to open confrontation to make their point now talk to companies behind the scenes or take their money to set up joint projects to tackle social and environmental problems.

Even Greenpeace, the environmental campaign group that went down in history for its assault on Royal Dutch Shell over the planned sinking of the Brent Spar oil platform nearly a decade ago, speaks a more conciliatory language about business today. The old view of companies as uniformly bad was "a big missed opportunity", says Stephen Tindale, executive director of Greenpeace UK.



The group has entered several alliances in the past few years with companies including Unilever, the consumer goods multinational, and N-Power, one of the UK's biggest electricity suppliers.

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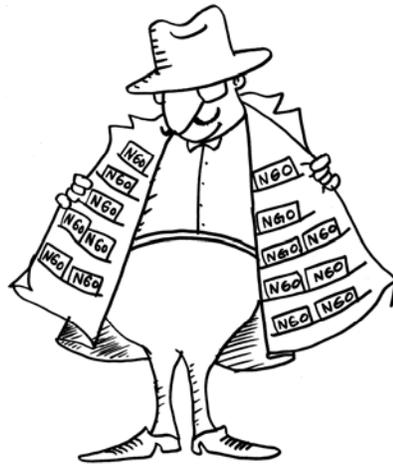
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"We think [alliances] are essential to unlocking progress," says Mr. Tindale. "The more unusual the alliance, the more effective it is likely to be. Greenpeace is interested in who has the power to make change, rather than simply being an outside group and protesting."

Greenpeace is in good company. Oxfam's UK arm recently joined forces with Starbucks, the global coffee retail chain, on a project to encourage sustainable coffee production in Ethiopia. Chiquita, the US banana giant once criticised for poor environmental and labour practices, has changed the way it does business with help from conservationists at Rainforest Alliance.

"It's amazing how rapidly these partnerships have become accepted on all sides," says John Elkington, who chairs SustainAbility, an international consultancy, and has worked in this area for 30 years. Meanwhile, a host of other alliances have been formed by charities and development agencies that have traditionally been less averse to working with the private sector. Save the Children, for example, has developed global partnerships with American Express, Procter & Gamble, Reckitt Benckiser and Ikea.

Behind the rapprochement between business and campaigners lie both realism and necessity. The rationale for companies is clear. Under pressure to restore public trust, they see partnerships as a way to gain credibility and demonstrate transparency. Harnessing the local



expertise of development agencies is also useful to them in understanding new market opportunities in developing countries. From the agencies' perspective, companies offer money, technology and influence on a scale that many feel they could not achieve on their own or with governments. "The intergovernmental system is not delivering through regulatory approaches. NGOs are now turning to market forces as a catalyst for change," writes Claude Martin, Executive Director of WWF, in "A Business Guide to Development Actors", a report by the International Business Leaders Forum and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

Another factor oiling the wheels of partnerships is the movement of people with campaign or research backgrounds into the private sector. Francis Sullivan, Director of conservation at WWF-UK, joined HSBC this year on secondment as an adviser, with a brief that includes furthering links with "environmentally interested parties".

Scott Keillor, head of corporate social responsibility and communications at Starbucks UK, started out as a research ecologist. Charlotte Grezo, Director of corporate responsibility at Vodafone, is an environmental biologist who formed links with campaign groups while working on climate change and biodiversity at BP.

Is the growth in partnerships unequivocally positive? Deborah Doane, who chairs the core coalition of campaigners pressing for mandatory corporate reporting on environmental and social performance, thinks not. She says there is a danger that alliances can give a misleading impression of progress. International partnerships to tackle supply chain standards, for example, do not address the underlying problem of low prices. She argues that companies always have the upper hand. "NGOs have felt that over the last few years in some of the broader partnerships their names have been used for PR purposes."



Mr. Elkington says there are other risks for campaign groups entering alliances. They may find that, once their expertise has been used, they are gradually squeezed out by others, including companies themselves and social entrepreneurs, who can operate without the constraints of having a large number of donors or members to please. "Others will learn to do the NGO thing, not necessarily in the NGO format," he says.

But companies also run risks in working with non-profit groups that can gain an insight into their weak points and use this to sharpen their

campaigns.

To prove durable, alliances need to produce their intended benefits. "We need some dramatically successful partnerships," says Mr. Elkington. He cites as positive examples Anglo American's work with loveLife, the South African HIV/Aids prevention programme for young people, and the UK government's Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, backed by some big investors, campaigners and companies, that encourages producer countries to disclose how they use revenues from oil, gas and mining.

Without successes, partnerships will create cynicism on both sides. There are usually other campaigners willing to use more

radical and aggressive tactics. A case was the hoaxer who pretended in a live interview on BBC World this month to be a spokesman for Dow Chemical announcing a \$12bn (£6.3bn) compensation fund for the victims of the Bhopal disaster in India.

Mr. Elkington believes that partnerships are not suitable for every campaign organisation. "I'd be horrified if we got to the point where every NGO was in bed with one or more companies. There's no question that it dilutes their capacity really to drive change through the media or the public mind. They become civilised and domesticated to some degree."

Christian Aid, a church-backed agency, avoids alliances with big



international companies, although it has a partnership with the UK's Co-operative Bank, which has carved a niche as an ethical financial institution.

Partnerships with multinationals are too risky, says Andrew Pendleton, head of trade policy at the charity, which published a scathing report about corporate social responsibility this year. "We don't want to do anything which is going to limit our ability to be critical," he says. "There's nothing wrong with the

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adversarial approach when it's necessary, and it sometimes is some of the corporate responsibility agenda is disingenuous." Mr. Pendleton says many of Christian Aid's supporters distrust big business. Greenpeace, on the other hand, says a survey of its supporters showed that they generally wanted more co-operation with business, even though some have opposed its corporate alliances. Mr. Tindale of Greenpeace believes non-profit groups will in future be divided between those that take corporate donations and those that co-operate with companies but eschew any financial relationship.

He says Greenpeace's key to retaining independence lies in refusing corporate funding, receiving no profits from joint ventures such as its renewable energy initiative with NPower and working with companies on single projects rather than endorsing all they do.

"The big players have access to capital and can do things quicker and on a bigger scale," he says, explaining the choice of Unilever and NPower as partners. "We use the judo-throw analogy: you use the weight of your opponent to achieve your objective."

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