

A note to a young person who wants to be a campaigner

Published: January 12, 2026, 11:41 pm

I have been asked by an undergraduate student how they might develop a career as a campaigner that might result in a change for the better in the world that they see all around them.

This is not the first time this has happened. So, I thought an article and maybe even a YouTube video on this issue might be of use, given that I am, in a formal sense, at the other end of my career. Let's start here.

My suggestion to my past students, when they asked me about this, which they quite often did, was that they should not be in a hurry. The world might be a mess, but very few people are going to do much about that at the age of 21. I know Greta Thunberg did, but she is the exception that suggests that my comment is right. Like it or not, changing the world is not going to be a sprint for anyone. It might not even be a marathon. It may be a triathlon, and even more.

In that case, success in achieving change is going to be dependent upon the training and preparation put in, more than anything else. So, to really understand what has to be changed, perhaps the most important thing to do is to observe and understand as much as possible about just exactly what it is that you don't like. Unless you do that, you cannot, in my opinion, be a successful campaigner. Successful campaigners do not just oppose things. Anyone can do that. Successful campaigners can work out what can be done to make things better, and such people are rare and invaluable. That is why training and commitment to a cause that might last a lifetime are required.

I very strongly suggest that this does not require postgraduate study at a university. If you want to be an academic, doing that makes sense. But the vast majority of academics in social sciences, at least, change very little, except the relative rankings on [Google Scholar](#). They like to think that what they're doing is impactful, but to be candid, it very rarely is. Academia is a game played from well behind the stands, if you want a football metaphor, or the pavilion, if you want a cricket one. Academics rarely get onto the field of play, so remote are they from the action.

Instead, what I suggest is that you get some practical training that will provide a basis for proving expertise to future potential employers, or people to whom you will want to prove your credibility. This might sound boring, but training as an accountant is a really good way to do this, so long as you do not get hooked on the income prospects that it provides, because as a campaigner, you will never have such prospects again.

Alternatively, if you can stand it, you could train as a lawyer.

Another option is to apply for a management training scheme in a large corporation, the civil service, local government, or even HM Revenue & Customs.

These are all, of course, very conventional career choices. And that is precisely my point. Unless you know how the system works, you really cannot critique it. That is precisely why the world ignores the vast majority of what those in think tanks, campaign groups and NGOs have to say, because their claims cannot, all too often, be backed up by any real-world experience to justify what they say.

What I cannot stress enough, however, is that you must do this knowing that you are using the training that any such organisation might provide for your own purposes. If you do not embrace that approach, these schemes might drive you close to insanity. They will, very largely, demand that you learn skills that are completely pointless because their real intention is to make you a cog in the neoliberal machine, to which it is their aim that you become addicted. That is exactly why you need to remember your own agenda, which is that you are going to learn these skills precisely so that you can criticise what is wrong, with the aim of working out how to make things better.

If you survive this process, you will have three invaluable qualities.

First of all, you will have more expertise. You might not be an expert as yet, but you will be better qualified than most. That means that you will have something that you can talk about with some authority, which means that people will have a reason to listen to you.

Second, you will either have realised just why you utterly dislike the system, or you will have embraced it. If you have embraced it, you will become one of the many. If you have still rejected it, you will become one of the few, and so will be valuable.

Third, based on your expertise, you are more likely to find someone who wants to employ you, and so give you the chance to begin to change the system. Many people in NGO, think tanks, and elsewhere do this on the basis of academic qualifications, but you will have something so much more valuable, which is real-world experience of exactly what is wrong and what is required to put it right.

However, once you have arrived in the NGO, campaigning or think tank world, let me offer you another word of warning. A great many of those in this sector long ago forgot

what they were angry about or wanted to change. Instead they too have been sucked into a career path, where they deliver transferable skills, saving the environment this week, campaigning on baby formula next week, and disability issues the week after. All these are worthy things, but these people do not bring conviction to any of these things. The campaigns they are involved in are just the latest on their own professional career trajectory, which in the end looks very neoliberal in its own right, and might even be framed by the organisations they work for in that way, with a corporate model all too commonly in use. These organisations do not, I stress, exist to change anything. After all, if they solved poverty, what would all those campaigning on that issue do? This is another reason why you need your own convictions to remind you what you really need to do, and to keep at it, and your own professional skills; they provide you with the detachment to be a good campaigner. This is incredibly important, or at least it has been to me.

I have no idea if this is what anybody who wants to change the world at the age of 21 wants to hear, but from the perspective of someone who has been trying to achieve just that for longer than I care to remember, this is the best advice that I can give. And, what is more, if things don't work out, you might still have something to fall back on if you follow my advice, and maybe that's no bad thing.

And one last thing that I should have mentioned, because it is absolutely critical. Hone your writing skills. You will need them. Write continuously, even if you are not sure why you need to do so. Publish a blog, even if no one reads it. And for exactly the same reason, in the era in which we now live, learn how to talk to a camera. It might only be your phone. Put the resulting video on that same blog. No one but your mum or ex might read it, but do not worry. The skills that you will gain will be invaluable in your future career, and by doing these things, you will have overcome the embarrassment involved in these processes, because initially they are real.