

Funding the Future

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Many people dream of changing the world, but very few do. In this video, I explain what you really need to do to stand a chance. And a word of warning: patience, skills, and conviction matter more than quick fixes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOD5MhaWp1Y&si=veC7dj8QT0g33rUI>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=ya4gj-18f5d5f-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

I was asked by a student recently, how could they build a career to change the world?

They wanted to be a campaigner. Quite specifically, they wanted to be an economic campaigner, and they realised that I'd been one of those things, and so they asked how could they follow in my footsteps in a sense, although no doubt they wouldn't want to do quite the same thing, and I've been asked this question a great many times over the years, and so I thought, as I'm now technically at the end of my career, it might be the right thing to do to offer some advice to those who are looking to set out on this journey as a campaigner.

I think the first and most important thing to note is that the world is not going to be changed quickly. You might be young and very angry at the age of 21, and you might

want instant results, and you might think that unless you get them, everything is going to go horribly wrong, but the truth is very, very few people change the world when they're age 21.

Greta Thunberg has, and that just proves my point. She's the rare exception to the rule that basically at 21, you are just learning the skills that you need to get going in life. And however angry you are, you will need to learn more.

So my first point is that you shouldn't be thinking about a career in campaigning as a sprint. You shouldn't even be thinking about it as a marathon. This is more like a triathlon, and a whole series of them come to that. So, training and preparation are what really matter if you want to change the world.

Before you can change anything, you really do have to understand what you dislike. That means that if you want to change the world of capitalism, you have to know how it works. If you don't know how it works, your critique of it will be wrong, and so you've got to work inside it. To me, this is the most important advice that I can provide to anyone who wants to be a campaigner.

I don't suggest that you do postgraduate study at a university. I don't think that will help you very much with regard to campaigning because, like it or not, and I've seen the world of academia from the inside, it doesn't change a lot, most particularly when it comes to social sciences. The world of academia, when it comes to social sciences, is all about observing the game, not changing the game, and so if you want to change the world and understand how it works, you've got to actually go and work in it.

You need to train as an accountant, or as a lawyer, or you need to join a management training scheme in a big firm, if you can get one.

Alternatively, work in HM Revenue and Customs, in the civil service, or local government, or any sort of business.

I make the suggestion because if you do one of these schemes, if you can get training in this way, you will really understand how the system works. But, and I make the point very carefully, remember that when you go into such a scheme, you are doing this to pursue your own agenda.

You don't have to tell your employers about that, by the way, and I actually rather strongly suggest that you don't. But, do remember that you are doing this so you can work out what's going wrong. If you don't, you will be fed all the nonsense that training as an accountant, a lawyer, a civil servant, or anything else requires, and all of that nonsense is designed to get you to buy into the neoliberal world.

You don't want to do that. You are there to critique it, and if you don't remember that, you will lose your path. So, remember that one of the things that you are learning about

by undertaking such a training scheme, whilst actually seeking to critique what you're observing, is resilience and reserve, and the foundations of strength that you're going to require to become a good campaigner; the disconnection if you like, that makes you the independent observer who can see what's going wrong and begin to work out what is required to go right.

You're training, but you're training on your own goals. And when you've been through a process of two or three or even four years of this, and that might seem a long time when you're 21, but trust me, in retrospect, it isn't, you will come out at the other end of such a scheme with more authority. You will, to some degree, be an expert.

Your expertise will improve over life; let me assure you that will be the case, but you will, by the time you finish your training, have skills that people will respect.

That will mean two things. One is that you will now be more employable, not least by credible NGOs, and think tanks who might value your expertise more than they do that of the person with the master's or the PhD, or whatever else, but who has no real-world experience.

And secondly, when you speak and speak, you eventually will, you'll be speaking with a voice of experience and this matters.

And I should add that there is something you should be doing whilst you're going through this training programme to prepare you for that time when you will speak with a voice of experience. You should be writing. You should be writing continuously. You should be writing about what you are interested in. You should probably be publishing a blog, even if not many people read it. And in the world that we now live in, you should be doing what I'm doing right now: get used to sitting in front of a camera and talking to it, because it isn't easy and we all hate it when we look at ourselves for the first time on camera, and we all loathe the sound of our voice because we don't believe we really sound like that. But you have to get used to it. And that's something you can do during your training, and do it quietly, potentially, because you don't want to employers; you do want to make it to the end of the training scheme. But if you do that at the same time as you're learning the skills they want to provide you with, you will have made yourself into a useful campaigner by the time you even arrive with an NGO, campaigning organisation, or whatever else.

But when you arrive in that NGO or campaigning organisation, let me warn you of another pitfall, and this is something that I've observed over my nearly 25 years of working with such organisations. I have never bought into any one organisation for the sake of undertaking my campaigning. Most people need to because they need to be paid. They need to be paid a salary. I've been lucky. By and large, I've been able to secure my own grants or have been able to do my work through an academic organisation, but pretty much doing what I like. That's been my good fortune, perhaps because I came in with 20 years prior experience rather than three or four.

But the point is that inside most NGOs and inside most campaigning organisations, there is an entity that looks remarkably like a neoliberal company. It might be structured like it. It might have all the hierarchies within it. It'll have all the career progression points within it. It'll have all the structures for communication. It will have all the red tape and rigmarole. You might be sucked into that and simply become a professional campaigner, and such people exist. They lose sight of why they ever became a campaigner in the first place. They simply create transferrable campaigning skills that take them through a world where they're campaigning for one thing this week, another next week, and yet another in a couple of months' time.

I'm not interested in that type of campaigner, because I don't believe they can change the world, because they don't know enough about what they're talking about. If you really want to succeed in campaigning, you have to develop a skill in a particular area and develop that for life.

Be wary of losing out and becoming a professional campaigner. They never change anything.

So, a few final thoughts.

Remember your own agenda.

Remember what you are angry about.

Keep it at the forefront of your mind. Read widely about it. Ensure that your skills in that area grow. Never stop reading. Never stop listening to podcasts. Never give up on adding to your knowledge.

Develop those skills I've talked about, that ability to write, that ability to talk into a microphone or towards a camera, and learn how the system is failing you.

After decades in this game, I think that is the best advice I can give.

And at the end of the day, be your own person. Be ethical, have conviction, speak with that conviction, develop skills that let you identify what is wrong and promote solutions as to what might be right. And if you do all of those things, you will have a career as a campaigner. And you will make a difference to the world, but just don't expect it to happen overnight.