

**An Introductory Guide to Community Action Including a Review of the  
Release Heather Osland Group.**

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*"The VWT is an advocate, championing the rights and entitlements of women. The Women's Trust exists to make a difference in women's lives. The Trust is inspired by the vision of a just and humane society in which women enjoy full participation as citizens, free of poverty, discrimination and disadvantage exists to make a difference in women's lives.*

*The Trust works to improve the status of, and conditions for, women in Victoria in whatever practical ways it can. It uses a funding program to invest in women and effect social change; forms strategic alliances; undertakes significant action projects; advocates on relevant issues; fosters networks for the exchange of skill, ideas and information; showcases women's talents; and encourages women from diverse backgrounds to participate in social and cultural events, discussion and debate."*

The following guide attempts to outline some strategies that can be employed to make our community more responsive to human needs and more effective in improving the equality of the human condition. Community organisation involves many factors and various configurations of individuals, groups and organisations in diverse situations. This guide will attempt to present a case for planned change through well-defined measures, using the *Release Heather Osland Group (RHOG)* as a case in point.

*“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” Martin Luther King Jr*

### **Worth of community advocacy**

Before embarking on community advocacy<sup>1</sup>, it is important to know how you and your groups' actions are located within the wider framework of democracy.

Community advocacy comes in all shapes and sizes. Whether it is focussed on domestic violence against women, asylum seekers or refugees, the introduction of bike paths in an area or lobbying against the proposed introduction of a motorcycle track, community activist groups have a common dominator. Community activism enhances our political freedom. The process of coming together as a group, defining the important issues, working within a framework to develop an agenda and then focusing resources on realising defined aims, fulfils the participatory function of democracy.

Community advocacy is a crucial link between citizens and their government, constructing a channel of access through which members can voice their opinions to those who govern them. With advocacy efforts and publicity campaigns, groups can make people more aware of policy problems, injustices within society, failures of the social, legal or political system and subsequently propose solutions.<sup>2</sup>

Within Australia's system of democracy, each vote counts equally. But numerical democracy can not take into account the intensity of opinion on an issue. Democracy is not an exercise in numbers and vote counting. It must also allow for the strength of feeling expressed and the quality of arguments advanced.<sup>3</sup> The very existence of advocacy groups goes some way to addressing this. Community advocacy is a mediating structure between the state and the individual and provides the mechanism for citizens to participate in the experience of ruling and being ruled.

#### **Background to RHOG**

*On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 1996 at the Supreme Court in Bendigo, a jury found Heather Osland guilty of murdering her violent husband, Frank Osland. Heather was violently abused, sustaining extreme physical, sexual and psychological abuse by her husband during the thirteen years they were together. On numerous occasions Heather asked the police for*

<sup>1</sup> Advocacy is defined as 'the act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy; active support'.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffery M Berry, *The Interest Group Society* Little, Brown and Company. Toronto. 1984. Pg 78

<sup>3</sup> Wyn Grant, *Pressure Groups, Politics and Democracy in Britain*. Philip Allan. 1989. Pg 6

protection, and time and time again presented to professionals with evidence of brutal attacks. Police were called to the Osland house to stop Frank Osland's violent attacks in the weeks prior to his death, but no legal action was taken against him. A neighbour testified to this at Heather's trial and admitted to his own fear of Frank Osland.<sup>4</sup>

Heather was beaten, kicked, dragged by the hair, threatened with razor blades held to the face, threatened with death and held under water by Frank Osland. She endured vaginal, oral and anal rape and suffered chronic urinary tract infections during her life with Frank Osland. These ended after his death. Frank Osland controlled her with harsh and mindless rules, stalked her and forced her to watch as he tore off the heads of the family budgerigar, broke her young daughter's nose and punched her young son in the mouth for dropping a plastic margarine lid.<sup>5</sup>

At the trial for the murder of Frank Osland, Heather and her son David Albion pleaded not guilty on the grounds of self-defence. She and David had dug a hole and Heather had administered sleeping tablets to Frank Osland to calm him prior to the fatal act. Heather was sentenced to 14 and ½ years imprisonment (with parole only after 9 and ½ years). In April 1997 Heather appealed her conviction and sentence to the Victorian Supreme Court. On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1997, the appeal was dismissed. In 1998, this decision was appealed to the High Court. The High Court appeal was dismissed by a majority of three to two. In July 1999 a Petition of Mercy was lodged with the State Attorney Generals Department. It was subsequently rejected (date unknown).

Following the initial sentence at the Supreme Court in Bendigo, a social campaign known as the Release Heather Osland Group (RHOG) was formed. In working for Heather's release from prison, the key issues the group addressed were the failure of the state to protect Heather from 13 years of violence and the discriminatory manner in which her case was dealt with, by failing to recognise the problematic gender issues in relation to self-defence.<sup>6</sup>

The RHOG supported Heather via: providing information; discussing relevant options with her; advocating on her behalf; visiting her in prison; writing to her; informing her of relevant events, publications and materials; fundraising to contribute to costs and liaising with relevant people. Other group aims included making a contribution towards law reform and working to educate those in the legal system, police, community groups and medical practitioners to better understand domestic violence and its effect on women and children.

<sup>4</sup> WAVE, "Release Heather Osland" <http://www.converse.com.au/opinion/osland>, 24 April, 2001

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pg 1

<sup>6</sup> Radio National: The Law Report, "The Courts Giveth and the Courts Taketh Away", <http://www.abc.net.au/talks/8.30/lawrpt/lr981215.htm> 15 December, 2001

*The RHOG was a vehicle for people of all ages and backgrounds to show their support for Heather Osland and voice their disgust at the conviction and sentencing she received, in addition to the 13 years of brutal treatment she endured at the hands of her husband.*

*The complex nature of the issues involved in working for the release of Heather, meant the RHOG faced a challenging battle in addressing the misconceptions around gender and violence. Society has a difficult time comprehending violent people, particularly when they act without apparent immediate provocation, and when the case involves a wife acting in a violent manner toward her husband. It eats at the core of what people think is natural. The family and the marriage between a wife and a husband is deemed to be sacred. Any actions that violate or undermine this sanctity are often seen as a threat to the social order.<sup>7</sup> It was debates of this nature that the RHOG had to address in a campaign that spanned a long, difficult but worthwhile 6 years.*

### **Organisation and Administration of a Group**

*“It is individuals who change societies, who give birth to ideas, who by standing out against the tides of opinion, change them.” Doris Lessing*

#### Members

The most important element of any activist campaign is members. To be effective a campaign needs the foundation of solid membership, with participants who are willing to invest their time and energy to be part of what can often be a lengthy and tiresome process.

When a groups' constituency is socially, geographically, ethnically, racially and religiously diverse, it is more difficult for opponents and targets to dismiss an organisation. Take for instance an organisation promoting the rights and opportunities for working women, to secure a cross-section of legitimacy and influence, the group will want to recruit union women, working women in both female and male dominated fields, and women with and without children. Attracting a rainbow membership is ideal. However, the types of people an organisation would most like to attract may not always be the people that are interested.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Debbie Kirkwood (RHOG Member), Federation of Community Legal Centres, 16 April, 2003

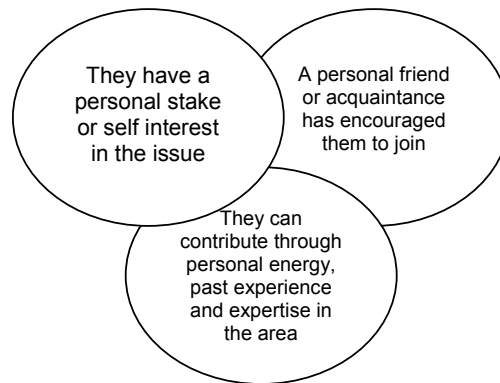
<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline B Mondros et al. *Organising for Power and Empowerment*. Columbia University Press. New York. 1994. Pg 11

*“We can change others only indirectly; the direct change must be to ourselves.”  
Hugh Crago*

### Recruiting Participants

There is no set formula on what obliges people to partake in community advocacy, however the motivation for members to join a group can largely be divided into three categories:

Members will usually join because.....<sup>9</sup>



Often people are more interested in joining and actively participating in an ongoing capacity if they are able to focus on issues they have a personal or vested interest in. The belief is that people with a vested interest are more willing to fight for what they want. Therefore, one way to identify membership pools is to identify people who experience the problem that your organisation is supporting.

Recruiting members who have a history in social activism can be a considerable benefit. People with a history in advocacy are familiar with the work and what to expect, can draw on existing networks they know of, and have prior knowledge and experience of which processes work and which ones don't. However selecting members on the basis of specific characteristics can be limiting. Sometimes it can be just as effective to train potential or current members in particular skills.

Personal contact can be the crucial factor that is the difference in people thinking about joining up, and continually attending a meeting. People like to feel that they have made a valuable contribution and most need validation from others that coming to a meeting or volunteering for a cause will make a difference.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 256

### **Membership of RHOG<sup>10</sup>**

*Individual members of the RHOG worked on a voluntary basis, although their paid work informed, and was informed by their involvement in this campaign. There was no mass drive to recruit members for the group, people it was thought would be interested, and would make a significant contribution to a campaign through their work with women, domestic violence and women who kill in self-defence were specifically targeted.*

*Given the highly personal nature of the campaign both in terms of support of Heather and the graphic issues involved, it was not feasible for the RHOG to have attracted and maintained a rainbow membership.<sup>11</sup> Rather, a small group of dedicated and well informed women was the most appropriate membership makeup for the RHOG. From within this group the nature of the relationship between the members and Heather varied. Some members of the group were particularly close to Heather and others not as much so. This dynamic augured well for enabling the group to maintain a degree of balance, focussing on the important issues rather than getting caught up in the highly individual and personal issues that can sometimes cloud the bigger picture.*

*“Leadership is the best when the people say, ‘we have done this ourselves.” Lao Tzu*

The effectiveness of an advocacy campaign is largely shaped by the everyday organisation of the group. From the outset, it is important to discuss and implement strategies and processes that contribute to and define the governing of the group. Essentially, social advocacy campaigns can be structured in a similar way to an organisation. Such a framework enables people who share a common frustration or desire, to work together under the collective banner of a campaign and articulate their demands in a united approach. Unity strengthens the authority within which a group can speak with. The less committed members are, or the more pressure they experience by multiple demands, the less effective a group is, as policy makers can see that the group does not speak with the complete support of its members. The more durable, the more frequent and the more intense the contact is between the members, the stronger the cohesiveness is within the group and the easier the group will be to organise for political action.<sup>12</sup>

Grassroots organising depends on democratic and decentralised process. It is essential for a group to establish a decision making process, conduct open meetings and have an atmosphere of trust in any campaign. Decision-making does not have to be a

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<sup>10</sup> Please refer to Appendix 4 for questions asked of RHOG members during the interviews conducted with them

<sup>11</sup> Pauline Spencer (RHOG Member), Telephone Interview, 13 June, 2003

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rose. *Politics in England: Change and Persistence (New Edition)* The Macmillian Press Ltd. 1989. Pg 34

bureaucratic or formalised process, it is more important for the group to make collective judgements and assessments. Members are more likely to feel ownership of an effort if they become actively involved if their input and participation is engaged in the defining stages of the campaign.

Even the smallest group must establish roles for members. Typically, the allocation of roles will give some workers more authority than others. The authority and structure of the group provides the framework for decision making on distributing funds, selection of issues, personnel, change in leadership and campaigning strategies.<sup>13</sup>

Dividing duties up between members usually involves a gentle mix of skill, capacity and time. There is little worth in getting people to do jobs if they are unable to do them. Yet it is conceivable that people can grow into roles. A group must avoid putting your members off side when determining who will take on what roles in the group, and nor do you want members to take on roles they are likely to execute poorly.<sup>14</sup> Often, duties will seem to 'fall' onto different people within the campaign. If people have been interested enough to join a campaign initially, it is more constructive for them to offer their skills or services in areas they feel capable in, rather than appointing tasks to members. It is then up to the collective will of the group to assess who is the most competent for the roles and divide duties up accordingly.

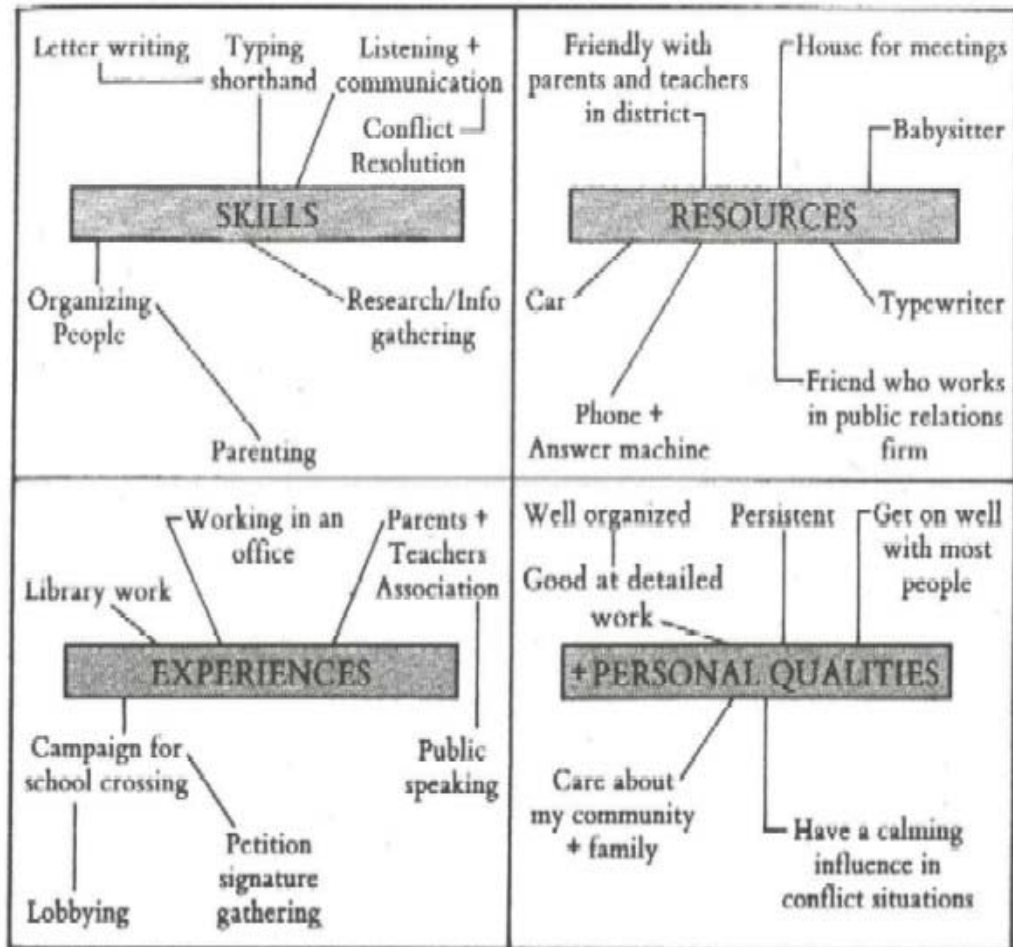
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<sup>13</sup>Jeffery M Berry, *The Interest Group Society* Little, Brown and Company. Toronto. 1984. Pg 51

<sup>14</sup> Mary Crooks, Executive Director, Victorian Women's Trust, 23, May 2003

The following diagram illustrates particular skills and experiences that you may want to look for in potential members of your group.<sup>15</sup>

EXAMPLE OF A BRAIN-NET:



**RHOG Procedures**

*The RHOG did not follow a formal set of organisational procedures, but devised a system that worked efficiently for them. The group met at the same place at the same time every fortnight and sometimes more regularly. The meeting time took into consideration seemingly insignificant factors like parking restrictions around the area (parking in Queens Street was free after 6.30pm). A regular meeting time and place, with consideration given to the logistics contributes to the consistency of processes, thereby increasing the likelihood that members will regularly attend and contribute to meetings.*

<sup>15</sup> Katrina Shields. *In the Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide for Social Action.*

*The groups' system of minute taking was relatively informal yet highly effective. Minutes were taken, actions were decided on the spot and then photocopies were made and distributed before the conclusion of the session. Whilst this strategy may have erred on the side of informality, it was cost efficient and effective – there was no 'lag' time to the process whilst minutes were typed and distributed by mail or email. It was the decision to conduct meetings in such a manner that contributed to the solid processes that allowed the RHOG to function efficiently for such an extended period.*

*In the planning stages, the group decided that two members would convene all meetings (by rotation) and these members were given permission to contact fellow members of the group, chasing overdue work tasks. Whilst this may have seemed to be giving members a disproportionate amount of power, it provided the group with a sense of structure and accountability. Members paired up with a buddy and if one member of the pair could not attend a meeting, the other pair was able to inform them of developments. This reduced the need for one member to consistently monitor the group as a whole, instead placing responsibility back on to the individuals in the group.*

*Utilising the services of particular volunteers (community development and social work students) was an efficient way for RHOG to keep the administration of the group professional and current. The RHOG had a finance and administration volunteer who came in every Monday for a year (leaving due to pregnancy), devoting the entire day to the administration of the RHOG; the banking of donations, replying to letters etc. This was an effective partnership that meant the core members of the groups group could devote their precious time to developing the campaign, concentrating their efforts on how best to free Heather, rather than on other necessary, but time consuming, tasks.*

#### Financial Resources

If an advocacy group is to be effective, the campaign needs to be able to draw on finances for administration, to hold forums, to generate publicity and to research and investigate where support and opposition for the campaign lies. Having the ability to draw upon some sort of funding is crucial if a group is to have a long term influential presence, as distinct from experiencing one-off success resulting from riding a tide in public opinion.

#### **Financing RHOG**

*The RHOG relied upon funds for legal proceedings, general administration including phone calls, photocopying, the upkeep of the RHOG's post office box and mail outs;*

*publicity – the placement of advertisements, the publication of information brochures and travel expenses.*

*Heather's advocate, in the early stages of the campaign, had specified funds from her place of employment that were directed towards community development. Funds, administered through an account from Brimbank Community Centre, were used for the group administrative costs. Unfortunately, this arrangement did not continue for the duration of the campaign, and it was then up to the group to raise funds to cover expenses. The RHOG relied on donations from the public and the funds from a retro fashion parade that the group organised (a hugely successful event that raised around \$9,000). When the group was unable to get legal aid for Heather's case, a grant from the Moyra Rainer Equal Opportunity Fund, as part of the Victorian Women's Trust, was made available for the costs associated with legal representation.<sup>16</sup>*

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead*

#### Group Size

One of the issues an advocacy group must address, is whether to keep the group size small, thereby maintaining momentum and reducing the need to keep revisiting old ground, or to expand the group to include everybody that puts their hand up to become involved.

From a logistical perspective, communication, the organising of meetings, sharing knowledge and strategy formation is easier to co-ordinate in a small group. A small group enables the campaign to speak with a collective voice. Members are more likely to understand one another better, and disruptive rifts or splits are less prone to forming. However, the challenge for a small group is that it cannot lay claim to having the patronage of a large number of people. Conversely, the danger of working with a mass is that often there can be a lot of people running around spawning very few results. Therefore, it can be effective to connect a broader outside base to a small group that is doing all the running.<sup>17</sup> A group may encounter problems of not remaining grounded without the foundation of a larger group in the background.

#### **Group size of RHOG**

*The most efficient make up for the RHOG was to restrict the group size to 6 members. . In the initial stages, there were debates over whether to increase the group size,*

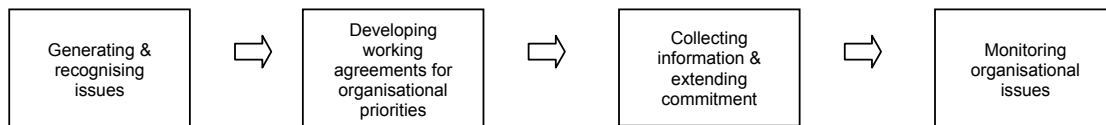
<sup>16</sup> Chris Momot (Heather's advocate & RHOG Member), Phone Interview, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2003

or to keep it small and tight-knit. Initially the group tried to include anyone that put their hand up to be involved. This meant that for the benefit of the new people, the group was continually revisiting old ground in order to update new members, or informing them of decisions that were agreed upon in their absence. It was this time, devoted to keeping people informed, that took time away from achieving the groups overall goal.<sup>18</sup> A decision was finally made to keep the group as 5 core members who split into three working groups; community education and lobbying; administration and information systems support; legal issues and Petition of Mercy procedures. Dividing the group in such a manner was an effective way of allowing outside people to be actively involved in the campaign through the smaller groups. That way people could campaign in their local area without exhausting the resources of the whole group. Operating in this fashion allowed the campaign to be broad-based but RHOG's ultimate direction was still managed by a core group.<sup>19</sup>

The decision to keep RHOG relatively small made for more a strategic, disciplined and unified course of action. From an organisational point of view, it was useful to keep the group at 5 people as it allowed for members to keep in close contact with each other, resulting in the formation of close and tight bonds. Members were prepared to challenge and disagree with each other. The group was as tight as a drum, trusting each other with important documents, strategies, feelings and emotions.<sup>20</sup> With a larger group, valuable time may have been wasted, devoted to reaching decisions and devising strategies that the majority agreed with. It could be impossible to reach such decisions without compromising the ultimate aims of the group, but with a smaller group there is only a handful of opinions to reconcile. Given the close relationship between members of RHOG these opinions were usually not too disparate that they couldn't be reconciled.

#### Defining the Issues and Goal Setting

The process of defining the issues and setting goals is the substance of a group's effort to pursue change. The process can be described in four stages:<sup>21</sup>



1. The purpose of this stage is to determine the problems and people interested in them;

<sup>17</sup> Mary Crooks, 23, May 2003

<sup>18</sup> Chris Momot, Reichstein Foundation, 18, June 2003

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>20</sup> Deb Davidson (RHOG Member), 23 April, 2003

<sup>21</sup> Jacqueline B Mondros et al. 1994. Pg 190

2. From the many problems identified, an issue or sets of issues are selected as 'issues for work'. The major goal of this phase is to determine which issues will be taken on and to form a working agreement among participants around selected issues;
3. In this phase, members must become more informed of the issue, its causes and implications;
4. Members must evaluate how effective the organisation's package of issues is, determine whether any issues can be handled simultaneously and whether issues can be linked together in order to keep people motivated.

In working through this process, it may be useful for the group to consider some of the following questions:<sup>22</sup> (For a more detailed list of questions your group should consider in the planning stages, please refer to Appendix 1).

<b>Questions you should address</b>	<b>How RHOG Addressed them</b>
What is wrong?	<i>The unjust conviction &amp; incarceration of Heather Osland</i>
Who is affected by this condition?	<i>Heather Osland &amp; women everywhere</i>
Whom should we try to help – ourselves, others or ourselves as well as others	<i>Heather Osland. Through her case, a precedent may be established for future cases</i>
What do we think should be changed? How?	<i>Heather should be released, the gendered nature of the law and society's response to battered women needs to be changed,</i>
Who should we approach for help in creating this change? Who are our target persons?	<i>Legal fraternity, politicians, community leaders</i>
How shall we try to convince these target persons and their supporters to develop this innovation?	<i>Using Heather's story</i>
What method shall we use in our social action? Why this one?	<i>Media, lobbying government, letter campaigns, public forums &amp; newspaper advertisements</i>
How can we make our attempts at influence most successful?	
How shall we organise ourselves to act, and who will do what?	
How can we prepare ourselves to take action and keep up our morale?	<i>Implementing effective strategies &amp; decision making procedures, supporting each other</i>

<sup>22</sup> Brad Erickson. *Call to Action: Handbook for Ecology, Peace, and Justice*. San Francisco : Sierra Club Books. 1990. Pg 44

In the goal setting process, members can often be inclined to set more difficult, rather than easier goals, to try and achieve. This can often be because the formidable nature of the goal will result in a greater satisfaction by the members if they achieve it. Secondly, a group will be more disappointed if they are unsuccessful in achieving a difficult goal rather than a simple goal. If the group is to maintain morale and the willingness of its members contribute, it is more advisable for the group to set realistic and achievable goals rather than high-flying and unattainable aims.

### **Main objectives of RHOG**

*Throughout the campaign, the RHOG was clear that their main goal was the release of Heather. Indeed there were other secondary aims that were of significant importance including making a contribution to law reform and community education. Heather herself strongly advocated that whilst the group worked for her release, they also looked at the broader systemic causes of her plight.<sup>23</sup> During the course of the campaign, the RHOG would find itself being lead in different tangents. It was therefore crucial for the group to be clear about their prime aim and objective. During the course of their meetings and discussions, the RHOG found it helpful to continually return to how particular strategies or methods would contribute to, or jeopardise the group's main objectives.<sup>24</sup>*

*Conducting a campaign with objectives focussed primarily around an individual can be problematic. There can be problems for the individual the campaign is focussed on, and problems for the group as well. An individual focus provided RHOG with something concrete and tangible – a human story that people could relate to and sympathise with.<sup>25</sup> However, the criticism the group faced was that the group was too exclusive and inward, and should have been more accommodating of other people in similar situations.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the highly individual nature of the group also made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible for members of the group to 'switch off' from the day-to-day dealings of RHOG. Paradoxically, this may also be a reason why the RHOG was so active, consistent and able to withstand so many hurdles along the way.*

*A campaign focussed around an individual can incite negative and unfavourable comments from those who find themselves in similar situations, that don't have the support of an advocacy group to rely on. They are of the 'why her...why not me' frame of mind (to which members of the group responded that if Heather was released, or pardoned, it would set a precedent for other cases). The assertion by others of perceived favouritism is understandable, but can be difficult for the individual to constantly deal with and respond to.*

<sup>23</sup> Pauline Spencer, 13 June, 2003

<sup>24</sup> Deb Davidson, 23 April, 2003

<sup>25</sup> Pauline Spencer, 13 June, 2003

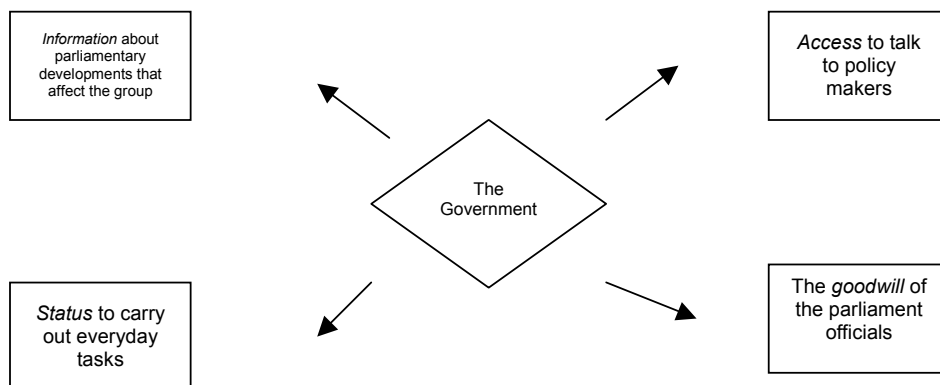
*During the campaign, the group experienced difficulty with the planning issues of the act – it was not discussed perhaps as much in depth as it should have been and for some time, it was at Heather's request that this issue not be discussed. This highlights the problematic nature of organising a campaign around an individual, if the group has to respect the wishes of the individual, even if they may be detrimental to the campaign. In situations like this, sometimes a group has to persuade an individual as to why a certain strategy is important, but this can be tricky, particularly when there are such complex and varied issues being considered.*

*Heather, relied on the group for support and would understandably experience frustrations over her uncertainty that the members of the group would not stay the distance, occasionally thinking the group was using her and her case to further their own personal agendas.<sup>27</sup> Whilst this was in no way true, it highlights the plethora of difficulties an individual can experience when there is a campaign focussed around them.*

### Agenda Setting

After your group has set an organisational framework and defined the important issues, it must try and expand interest in the issue so that it gains a place on the public agenda. Hopefully the group will have generated enough interest and support for the issue that sufficient pressure has been rallied that forces the issue onto the agenda for the government's serious consideration.<sup>28</sup> Entrance onto the formal agenda however does not automatically mean a group will achieve its aims. Rather, it means the issue has been selected from a multitude of others for further consideration.

During the above mentioned process, there are four key things that your community advocacy groups may seek from the government<sup>29</sup>:

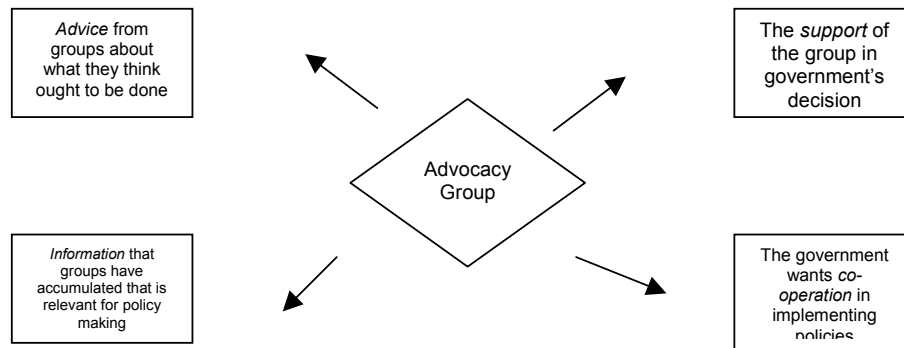


<sup>26</sup> Deb Davidson, 23 April, 2003

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Jacqueline B Mondros et al. 1994. Pg 189

The government or bureaucracy seeks several things in return:<sup>30</sup>



### The Limits of Influence

Often a campaign's power can be limited through no direct fault of their own, but by the government's desire to appear to be addressing wider political issues instead of the interests of a sectional or cause group. Given this, groups should attempt to locate their (often) specific issues within a wider political or social context, thereby ensuring that they can assert that their cause appeals to a wide and diverse range of sensibilities.

### Forming Alliances

The effectiveness of a community advocacy group is dependent upon its ability to define and set goals and develop tactics to realise these goals. Given the massive workloads that campaign members often undertake, it can be effective to foster coalitions between other groups with similar interests. Whilst some groups rarely work in coalitions because they don't wish to compromise their goals or agendas in any way, others gain strength from drawing links with other groups, sharing information and resources (mailing lists, information on bureaucrats and parliamentarians, research) and building strategic coalitions.

When fostering alliances with other groups, you must ensure that your group is solid and not too ideologically focused. Your group must be willing to bend. A coalition will not work if rigid rules are in place and insist everyone follow them.<sup>31</sup> Each group must ensure it maintains a sense of individual purpose and works together to complement other groups and not take over. Be discerning about whom you invite into a coalition, 'more' isn't always an advantage.

Building coalitions is not always simple. Some conflict is inevitable, it is possible to maintain diversity by having non-binding policy statements, stressing areas of agreement and defining areas of cooperation, shared values and visions. Prior research can disclose matters

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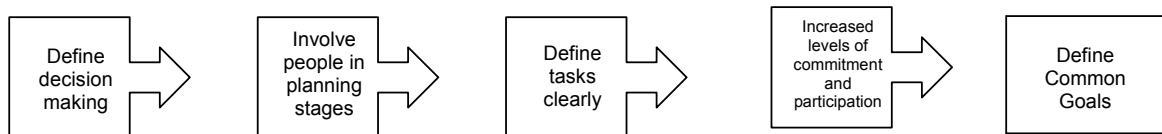
<sup>29</sup> Richard Rose. 1989. Pg 78

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 83

<sup>31</sup> Jenni Mitchel (Veteran Social Campaigner), Lygon Street Mall, 14, May 2003

for possible conflict and help shape more realistic expectations. Another option is that areas of disagreement can be defined and then left alone.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes members have their own agendas they want accomplished and can be reluctant to compromise in order to adopt other issues to campaign against. A reluctance to form alliances can sometimes be attributed to issues of burnout. Members often don't feel they can undertake extra issues in addition to their own due to the mental stresses associated with campaigning.

The organisational issues largely remain the same for both a single group and a coalition.<sup>33</sup>



**Method**

*“Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.” Edmund Burke” 18<sup>th</sup> Century Statesman*

Members of social activist groups supply information to the community in an effort to both generate support for their campaign and to target persons who are in the position of being able to effect change. The belief is that the ideas a group wishes to communicate will demonstrate to people that things are ripe for change, or that the information provides a sensible solution to a perceived problem.

**Methods for Generating Awareness for your Campaign**

• Speeches to clubs	• Mass Meetings
• Outdoor Rallies	• Newspaper Stories
• Mailed Brochures	• Postcard Maillot
• Public Hearings	• Street Theatre
• Street Displays	• Parades
• Letters to the Editor	• Forums/Conferences
• Write a Piece in a Relevant Newsletter	• Phone Campaigns
• Picketing	• Boycotts and sit-ins
• Public Education Meetings	• Petitions

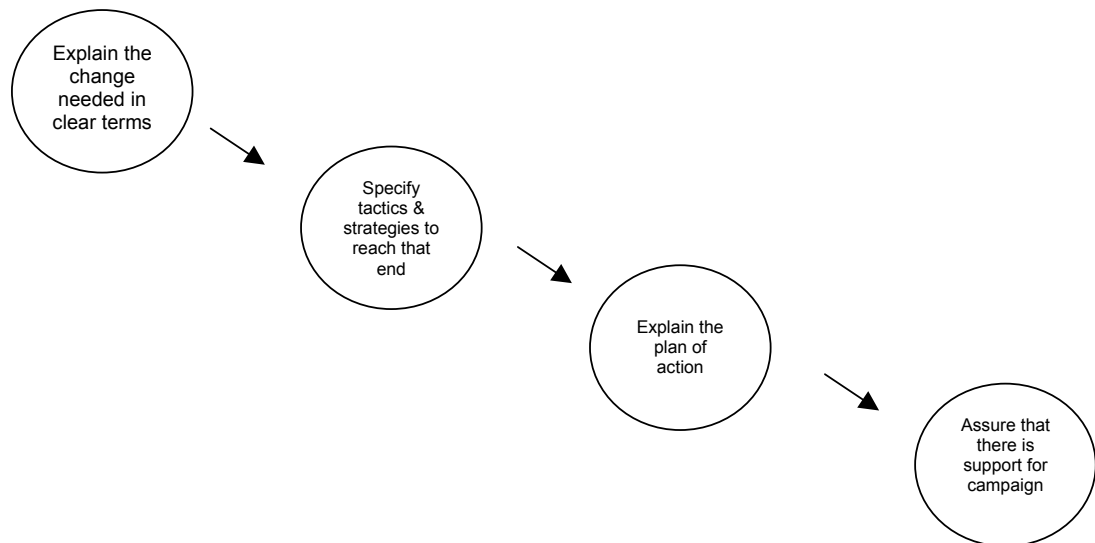
<sup>32</sup> Katrina Shields. 1994. Pg 19

Each method provides a given message to numerous potential listeners, however only a select few are likely to pay attention. Generally, there are two kinds of individuals who will sit up and take notice of a campaign: those who are looking for an *answer* to a problem and find it in the data or information provided, or those who already have ideas on the matter and discovering the information *confirms* the ideas and views they already possessed.<sup>34</sup> By carefully selecting the language you choose, messages can be kept simple and powerful, and if repeated regularly, are more likely to have an impact and be retained.

People who have never dealt with the issue and have no preordained ideas about it may show their concern if the style the information is presented in is particularly agreeable. The provision of factual information is more likely to have an effect if it speaks to a need of the listeners and proposes strategies and tactics that can be implemented to rectify the issue.

Any information presented to potential supporters and people in powerful positions is more influential if it follows the simple formula below.<sup>35</sup>

To be effective, the method should....



**Methods employed by RHOG**

*For RHOG to be effective in its ultimate aim, it needed to target and raise the awareness of a whole range of people. The projects the RHOG engaged in to reach this end included developing a supporters kit that people could access that included background*

<sup>33</sup> Brad Erickson. 1990. Pg 34

<sup>34</sup> A.F. Zander., *Effective Social Action by Community Groups*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990. Pg 122

<sup>35</sup> Please refer to Appendix 2 for additional strategies on how to win over potential supporters.

*information, information on legal issues, explanations as to why women kill in self defence and an outline of strategies and methods to assist individuals in community education and lobbying. The RHOG ran community education and workshop sessions that provided people with information, practical suggestions and answers to some of the questions they were likely to encounter whilst campaigning for Heather's release. The group acquired a mailing list from Women's Information - WIRE and built on this in order to send out information relating to the campaign (although RHOG neglected to acquire the email list, which would have been highly useful). The community legal centres and Melbourne women's organisations were crucial in mobilising support for Heather. RHOG developed and maintained a website devoted to Heather that had campaign updates, explanations of the legal issues, a supporter kit and links to other relevant websites. Postcard mailouts and letter writing campaigns to the state government and opposition asked for their support with Heather's Petition of Mercy. Release Heather! publication was generated that provided people with a background to the case, information on Battered Wife's Syndrome, relevant newspaper articles and a piece written by Heather herself asking members of the community for their support. Details of the group and their work were placed in several journals and newsletters, and notices were placed in some of the daily Melbourne newspapers to indicate the vast amount of support for Heather.*

*During the initial stages of the campaign, the RHOG enlisted the help of a project worker who for a fee sought out every relevant organisation that RHOG could tap into in order to circulate relevant information about the campaign.*

*"Central to the advancement of human civilisation is the spirit of open enquiry. We must learn not only to tolerate our differences. We must welcome them as the richness and diversity which can lead to true intelligence." Albert Einstein*

## **Government and Lobbying**

Before a group can work towards desired change, it is important to have an understanding of the structuring and functioning of government. In Australia, we have three levels of government that have different and overlapping responsibilities. Each tier of government has its own bureaucracy, operating procedures and ways activist groups can get involved.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to direct your concerns or issues to the relevant tier of government. A lot of policy work is done in the government departments, and many big decisions are made by bureaucrats and endorsed by the politicians. In any campaigning aiming at policy outcomes, it is important to include bureaucrats in the communication process. Much of the government's policy work involves public consultation. Therefore the mood of the community at large is an

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<sup>36</sup> For a more comprehensive outline of the responsibilities of government, please refer to the Appendix 3.

important factor in policy making, as governments usually want policy that is workable and in accordance with what the community actually wants.

### **Lobbying**

*“One has to speak out and stand up for ones convictions. Inaction at a time of conflagration is inexcusable.” Mohandas Gandhi*

The central focus of lobbying is to involve people in the legislative and policy change process. Trying to influence those who make policies that affect our lives is often critical for a group. Lobbying establishes a dialogue with those in power.

Much of a lobbyist time is taken up with being visible - making their presence felt. A lobbyist must reinforce to those in decision-making positions the values and desires of the advocacy group. They must constantly remind legislators, staffers and other lobbyist that they are around and the views of the campaign they represent should be considered when decisions are being made. A lobbyist must keep the members of the group abreast of policy developments. The daily work of a lobbyist is to be the eyes and ears of the advocacy group.

For the lobbyist, honesty is not so much a matter of virtue as necessity. They simply cannot execute their job effectively if there are any doubts surrounding their credibility.<sup>37</sup> When generating memos, handouts, press releases formal comments and in everyday dealings, the only content that counts is specific fact. Lobbyists increase their effectiveness as they increase their knowledge of the specific area. Lobbyists who fully understand the intricacies of an issue enter into a privileged group of experts who can talk the same language.<sup>38</sup>

### The Art of Compromise

The success of a social activist group rests on its ability to compromise. It is unlikely that a social advocacy group will have all of its goals and demands met. A group will be better received by those in powerful positions if the lobbyist can demonstrate to the key players that their advocacy group is willing to comprise somewhat on its demands.

### Create a dependency

To increase the regard within which government or officials regard a lobbyist, it is crucial for lobbyists to create a feeling of dependency around themselves. The lobbyist should be a trusted source of information that the group and officials can call upon when they need to

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<sup>37</sup> Jeffery M Berry, *The Interest Group Society* Little, Brown and Company. Toronto. 1984. Pg 67

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 7

find information on the issues. A reputation for credibility and high-quality factual information provided in a prompt and efficient manner is necessary if a lobbyist is to be an effective contributor to a campaign.

#### Politicians Attitudes towards Lobbyists

In May 1991, Committee Bulletin published comments by Warwick Smith (LIB) and Brian Courtice (ALP) on how politicians prefer to be lobbied. Their suggestions are summarised below:<sup>39</sup>

##### *Warwick Smith (Liberal Party)*

- ★ keep paperwork to a minimum
- ★ applying the 'relevance' test
- ★ pay attention to what the member's interests are
- ★ take into account the electorate profile
- ★ keep the approach personal
- ★ be timely
- ★ leave behind an effective 'footprint'
- ★ avoid the production line technique of form letters
- ★ focus on facts rather than emotions
- ★ be brief!
- ★ be patient!

##### *Brian Courtice (Australian Labor Party)*

- ★ the lobbyist's competence is a crucial factor
- ★ be punctual
- ★ be well-briefed
- ★ don't trivialise
- ★ commitment backed by facts and evaluated appraisals
- ★ discern between the important and unimportant issues
- ★ use and build on past credibility
- ★ be up front and honest
- ★ have the facts ready

<b><i>RHOG's lobbying efforts</i></b>
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<sup>39</sup> David Kindon, *Australia Committee Bulletin: Guide to lobbying, Parts 1 – 4*. The Rowland Company. Canberra. Pg 156

*The RHOG did not directly engage in the services of a professional lobbyist, however their actions throughout the campaign reflect the actions of one. The methods the RHOG engaged in were educating the community and attaching awareness to Heather's name. However the campaign perhaps failed to enlist the support of some of the most relevant members of the community. The RHOG could have directed more of their efforts towards enlisting the support of key stakeholders; feminist lawyers and women's bar groups. A lot of time was focussed on lobbying politicians and educating the broader community. This was indeed important to illustrate to the government that ordinary people were concerned with Heather's case and not just the 'usual suspects'. (aka. feminists)<sup>40</sup> However, in focussing so much attention on the community, the people who possess a degree of power and influence were somewhat neglected.<sup>41</sup> The group had many requests from community organisations to conduct talks and the RHOG were often obliging. Whilst conducting community forums is necessary to an extent, there are limits to how this could have contributed to Heather's release. A lot of time was devoted in analysing requests, and not enough time spent on thinking strategically about how responding to the requests would achieve the final aim.<sup>42</sup>*

*Perhaps if more time was spent suring up the feminist legal community, who it was mistakenly presumed would just come on side, the RHOG may have ultimately been more successful. The RHOG had the support of the community, church people, and a number of politicians, but they did not have enough of a legal backing.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, given the nature of the training the legal community receives, and the thought processes they are trained to use, expecting them to think along different, more linear lines is difficult, which is what the RHOG needed them to do if they were to support them.*

*During the campaign it became evident that there was a small element of the community that felt no compassion towards Heather's plight. These were the people that were of the mind that Heather 'got what she deserved' - thus indicating the depth of prejudice that existed within the community. For people like this, community education is perhaps the only way attitudes about discrimination of women are going to change. In a more general sense, the educating of the community is important, however to reach RHOG's final aim, it was not going to be as instrumental.*

*In the lead up to and during the deliberation of the Petition of Mercy, the RHOG devoted a considerable amount of time to lobbying the state government and opposition. Countless letters were sent, and the group was in frequent communication with the Attorney General's department with the hope that a positive outcome to the Petition would result. In*

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<sup>40</sup>Pauline Spencer, 13 June, 2003

<sup>41</sup> Amanda George (RHOG Supporter), Telephone Interview, 7 July, 2003

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

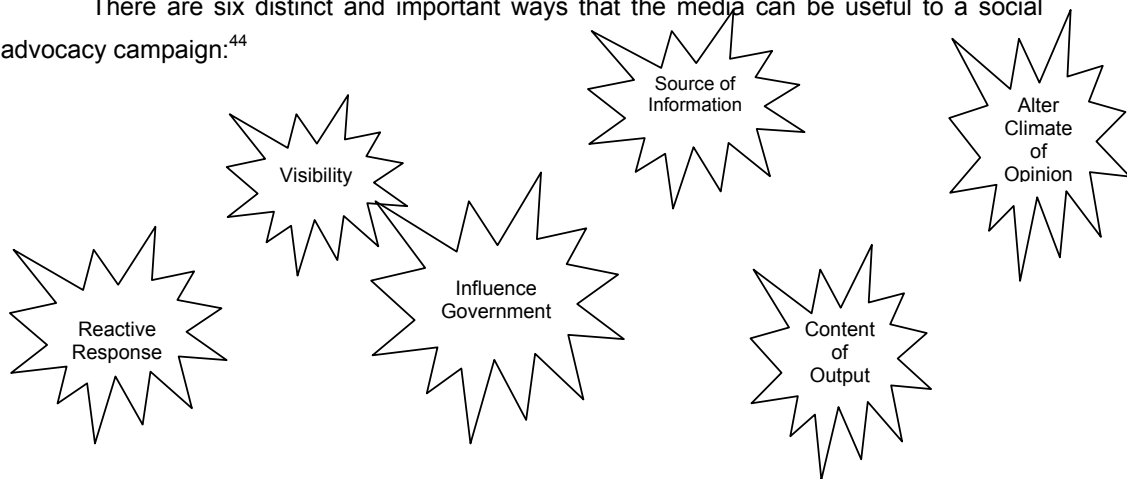
*looking at why the petition of Mercy was rejected, it is important to note the political climate of the time. Given the political circumstances; the fact that Victoria had just had a State election that resulted in a change of Government, the petition that was being considered by Attorney-General the then Hon. Jan Wade MLA (Liberal Party) had to be resubmitted to the Attorney-General, the Hon Rob Hulls MLA. It is questionable as to whether any amount of campaigning could have persuaded a new government to accept the petition and free Heather. Unfortunately, the unwelcome outcome that the Attorney General handed down is indicative of circumstances that are beyond the control of the RHOG and their exhaustive efforts.*

## **Dealing with the Media**

Getting a groups issues covered by the media (local/national radio, television and newspaper) is vital, whether exposing human rights violations or raising complaints about local noise pollution. In Australia's current social and political climate, the media has a powerful effect on the public, organisations and politicians, informing and moulding their opinions on issues. Given the media's ability to provide information, incite discussion and debate on public affairs; enlighten the public enabling them to make it capable of self-government, and safe guarding the rights of the individual, the media can be a highly useful tool for advocacy groups. However, dealing with the media can be a complex balancing act and groups should be ever mindful of the media's intentions.

The possibility of a social activist group creating their own media through publishing magazines, newsletters and legislative alerts should not be disregarded. This approach allows a group to spin doctor information in exactly the fashion they chose, and also allows the information to be directed at a specific target audience, which can have significantly, more impact than a mass media campaign can.

There are six distinct and important ways that the media can be useful to a social advocacy campaign:<sup>44</sup>



<sup>43</sup> Deb Davidson, 23 April, 2003

<sup>44</sup> Wyn Grant, 1989. Pg 3

- The media can be used to establish a groups visible presence. Constant exposure in the media reassures members that the group is active, and this helps to retain members. There is however little point in recruiting a large number of new members as a result of a blitz of media activity if their interest and support cannot be retained;
- The media is an important source of information for groups. Lobbyists scan the papers in the search of stories, opinions and letters related to themselves;
- Climate refers to the long-term efforts of a group to change the climate of opinion on an issue in a way that favours their objectives. This may involve seeking to influence 'informed opinion' and decision makers, but it is also important to seek long-term changes in public values, which set the context within which policy is made or altered;
- Sometimes a reactive response is necessary when a news story emerges that is relevant to a groups concerns or activities. The group may be invited on a television program to explain its position, or it can write to the press in response to editorials or letters from others;
- Using the media to exert influence on govt is clearly important. Generally, ministers will not change their policies because of a newspaper editorial, although a press campaign may oblige them to make a response on a particular issue. Sometimes the govt can be embarrassed into changing its mind through leaks of its intentions;
- Groups may lobby the media directly and attempt to influence the content of its output.

### **What makes a skilled media spokesperson?**

Although campaigns cannot totally control the medias final product, they can significantly influence it by choosing a skilled media spokesperson. Some groups prefer to direct all media contact to a specific person. Whilst this may seem to deprive other members of the opportunity to talk with the media, it can foster a certain degree of uniformity among the groups media responses. Discussing and strategising about how the group will respond to the media in the planning stages of a campaign usually yields a more supportive final media product.

The key is to establish the message you want communicated to people and ensure that the media spokesperson follows through in conveying this message. There are no set requirements on how long or how detailed a spokesperson is required to be when speaking to the media. By training your spokesperson to stick to the central message, the group reduces the risk of media misrepresentation.

A skilled media contact is one that is available for comment when the media calls, provides useful, directed and specific information (as opposed to *all* information possible) and has access to prepared media briefs that provide reporters with a background and outline of

the issues. In selecting the groups media spokesperson, it is not always necessary to choose the person with the most knowledge of the campaign, but rather someone who is disinclined to be provoked or become defensive, and can speak eloquently on their feet.<sup>45</sup> Such a person must avoid appearing evasive, act measured and non-emotional, and try to come across in a 'human' rather than professional manner.<sup>46</sup> Reporters enjoy interviewing real people with real problems. So many interviews reporters conduct are with skilled spin control experts. The natural demeanour of a community speaker who allows their personality to shine through can produce a most positive story.<sup>47</sup>

#### ***RHOG's interaction with the Media***

*One of the debates the group faced was whether to take Heather's case to the media, thereby running the risk of having her portraying in a negative fashion, or whether to have no media exposure at all. The RHOG decided to engage with the media, and so as to ensure that they had the best, (i.e. the most supportive) media coverage possible, they developed certain strategies.*

*In the planning stages, the group appointed a person to the role of media contact to deal directly and specifically with the media. Rarely would the group give verbal off the cuff interviews, preferring instead to send press releases. The groups media contact would deal with the media, however if this was ever not the case, members of the group were always briefed before their encounter. In addition, RHOG developed media lines that could be used at press conferences before the actual event. That way, group members didn't have to speak off the top of their head, thus minimising the risk of a member saying something that could be detrimental to the campaign.*

*RHOG's media contact tried to be always available, could communicate crisply with the media and spoke with authority.<sup>48</sup> In fulfilling this role, it was important for the contact to come across in a measured manner – as an approachable human, rather than as a professional. RHOG were ever mindful of the constraints and the circumstances under which the media operates. To this end, if the media requested information around the case, the RHOG had developed a reference folder. This 'Bible' contained summary sheets that could promptly be sent to journalists on request, providing them with the facts of the case. In recognising that individual journalists have a job to do, doing the background work and providing them with as much support as possible, gave RHOG the best chance of positive media coverage in the long run.*

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<sup>45</sup> Jenni Mitchel, 14.5.2003

<sup>46</sup> Pauline Spencer, 13 June, 2003

<sup>47</sup> Bob Houlton., *The Activist's Handbook : A Guide to Organizing and Communication.*

London. Arrow Books [for] the Society of Industrial Tutors, 1975. Pg 99

<sup>48</sup> Mary Crooks, 23, May 2003

*During the Petition of Mercy proceedings, the Attorney Generals office advised RHOG not to take the case to the media, indicating that this would hamper the chance of a successful outcome. Involving the media more actively in this stage of the case may have resulted in a more successful outcome for Heather, but because RHOG followed the advice of the decision-makers, they did not actively engage in the media during this stage.<sup>49</sup> Whether or not the outcome of the petition would have altered if RHOG had of gone to the media will never be known. However it does illustrates the dilemma the RHOG faced when deciding whether to stimulate public support for Heather's petition, or whether to keep the case quiet allowing the Attorney Generals department to make their decision (which RHOG were lead to believe would be favourable) without the pressure of public scrutiny.<sup>50</sup>*

### **Avoiding Media Misrepresentation**

Often the belief is that media coverage will help generate support of an activist position. This is not necessarily always the case. The key to minimising the risk of the media misrepresenting your group is to establish a reporter's objectives and the angle they intend to pursue before you commence dealing with them. Reporters who decline to divulge their purpose when seeking your comments are unlikely to further your case, and should be avoided. Be wary when dealing with journalists who have no prior history of fair coverage on your issue.<sup>51</sup> If possible, try to obtain a copy of the press questions prior to the interview. Rely on reporters who are known to be sympathetic and on a few journalists rather than issuing blanket press releases and co-operating with any reporter who shows interest in your group. Fostering solid relationships with select journalists is likely to yield better results from your efforts.

### **Responding to Media Bias**

Unfair or inaccurate media attention can be detrimental to a campaign. However, responding to inaccurate claims can be just as damaging. To determine whether to respond or let inaccurate media reporting slide, the group must establish whether the media piece has caused any real harm to the campaign. If not, then the best response is no response.

To determine whether unfair media coverage has meant your group must go into damage control, first consider the author and the forum. If the unfair coverage comes from a

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<sup>49</sup> Deb Davidson, 23 April, 2003

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Bob Houlton., 1975. Pg 99

credible source, you should consider whether the bias was central to the story, and if so, a response is definitely appropriate.

The most common response is to write a letter to the editor. Effective letters can go a long way to developing your cause, just ensure to focus on *your* message rather than reiterating the unfair claims. Dismiss the credibility of the unfair story in the first few lines and then use the remainder of the piece to convey or reiterate your message.

#### ***RHOG's attempts to avoid media misrepresentation***

*The RHOG did experience media bias in the form of negative reporting from various parties during the campaign. There were those who said that Heather got what she deserved, whilst others believed that Heather's case was the wrong one to take to the High Court, and that members of RHOG should have waited for a 'more deserving' cause to come along. Unfortunately, there were some people in the media that RHOG was never going to win over, but in reality winning the support of every journalist wasn't the main aim of the campaign. However, in order to minimise the risk of media misrepresentation, RHOG was very aware of what their weaknesses were - the hard issues as they were referred to; the planning. RHOG had an idea of what the angles journalists would try to pursue in order to get a juicy grab, and in realising this, RHOG tried to develop strategies to respond accordingly. RHOG required that the media provide the group with the interview questions prior to any interviews.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately though, little strategies can guard against the media gaining access to, and circulating information contained in court transcripts (i.e. confidential phone intercepts, where Heather was heard to be talking to her son in an incriminating manner).<sup>53</sup> Given the fact that the campaign was focussed around an individual, it was easy for the media to portray Heather in a negative light, and doing so makes for much more entertaining reading. However writing letters to the editor, utilising other media strategies and appointing a skilled media contact, put RHOG in the best position for favourable media coverage.*

### **Technology**

In these days of high technology, grass roots organising can be enhanced by the speed of communication. Groups that have access to phone, email, Internet and fax can circulate up to the minute information on key issues to a national and global neighbourhood of mutual interest.

#### The Internet

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<sup>52</sup> Chris Momot, 18, June 2003

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

The Internet can play an important role in the creation and amplification of a campaign. The immediate transfer of information allows groups to distribute their message at minimal financial and environmental cost. Today, if a group does not have a website that is maintained regularly, the campaign limits its potential supporter base, gives the perception of being out of touch, living in the past and in fear of the future.

### Email

Email has many obvious benefits for activists. It can be used for information sharing, news updates and generating group discussions without holding meetings. Once an email is typed, it can be sent to an infinite number of recipients. This allows groups to side-step the time consuming and costly copying, labelling and mailing process associated with other communication methods.

The use of email is not devoid of its faults however access to email is restricted to those members of society who have access to computer and this demographic is often concentrated amongst the more affluent members of society. Consequently, email can rarely be used to rally low-income people, because they rarely use the equipment. Moreover, whilst people have access to email through their place of work, they can be reluctant to receive political material at work.<sup>54</sup>

### ***The benefits of high speed technology for RHOG***

*High-speed communication was useful for certain elements of RHOG's campaign, however when it came to communicating with Heather, it was largely irrelevant. Throughout the entire campaign communicating with Heather has only been via the telephone, mail or visiting her in prison.*

*Communicating with Heather was vital for the overall success of the campaign, and the RHOG developed strategies to deal the communication hurdles. Whilst Heather was in Deer Park prison, she was receiving weekly visits from the group members. It is sadly ironic that when Heather moved from Deer Park to the more pleasant Tarrangowa prison, its remote location made it increasingly more difficult for members to visit her.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the group shaped their strategies accordingly: RHOG met at the women's legal centre of a Thursday evening from 6.30pm-8.30pm. Heather was able to have this location as one of her*

<sup>54</sup> Edward G Carmines. *Issue Evolution : Race and the Transformation of American Politics*. Princeton. Princeton University Press. 1989. Pg 37

<sup>55</sup> Deb Davidson, 23 April, 2003

*ten allocated numbers she was able to ring from prison. At about 8pm when the meeting was concluding and STD rates decreased, Heather would phone in and check in with the group. That way, any decisions or strategies that had been decided upon during the course of the meeting could be checked with Heather before they were implemented.<sup>56</sup> By making the best use of all available avenues, the RHOG made a difficult and potentially restrictive situation, more manageable*

*Nonetheless, one of the communication hurdles the group could do almost nothing to overcome, was the prison environment in which Heather had to communicate with the group from. The prison has total control over Heather's life and is anything but an appropriate environment in which to revisit her horrific ordeal and make decisions about the direction of the campaign. In the lead up to the High Court trial, where Heather was having to recollect certain facts in precise detail and prepare herself to take the witness stand, the austere conditions and unsupportive prison environment made it especially difficult. Unfortunately no amount of high-speed technology could have helped RHOG overcome this disturbing experience.*

### **Measuring Success**

Some groups have objectives that are clearly defined, which makes the process of measuring their success relatively straightforward. It is increasingly harder to measure success when a group has multiple objectives and has been forced to compromise on certain issues. In addition, whilst a group may not have had ultimate success in achieving its goals, it may have shaped or influenced people's thinking. The exact extent of this impact is difficult to measure.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, it is important for members to measure the group's successes along the way by acknowledging even the small gains and triumphs.<sup>58</sup> Sometimes members tend to think their group is doing well because they have no persuasive indication to the contrary. Sometimes the belief is that 'no news is good news'.

### **Burnout**

*"Burnout is an occupational hazard for high achievers with high ideals". Patricia  
Vizderman*

Social action can often be motivated by idealist values that can be challenging to maintain in the face of a blatantly less than idealist world.<sup>59</sup> Sometimes the issues tackled can seem insurmountable, and as campaigning is often a lengthy process, members can often

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<sup>56</sup> Chris Momot, 18, June 2003

<sup>57</sup> Mary Crooks, 23, May 2003

<sup>58</sup> Jenni Mitchel, 14, May 2003

<sup>59</sup> Katrina Shields. 1994. Pg 89

experience feelings of grief, hopelessness or despair during the duration of the campaign. These feelings can often be interchanged with feelings of anger, numbness or even disbelief.

*“Support is standing so close behind your friends that the only way they can move is forward”*

### Coping Strategies

In order to cope with the problems associated with burnout, it is crucial to acknowledge the emotions you are experiencing. Often releasing your feelings and sharing them with group members renews hope and energy. Continuously and rigorously campaigning can often come at the expense of our body and its basic needs.

For many groups, the campaigning does not stop at 5pm. On the contrary, this time usually signals the opening of the door to the ‘home-cum-office’. Operating with papers all around the house and meetings conducted at the kitchen table can often mean there is no escaping the campaign.<sup>60</sup> Basic strategies to avoid burning out include setting aside time in the day and the week for yourself. Try to build fun and solidarity into the groups daily operation and ensure that laughter and friendship is not a by-product of your campaign, but actually structured in it. Encouraging exercise, allowing people to have time off and being aware that not everybody’s work capacity is the same is also important. Organise social gatherings after the groups meetings, occasions separate from the day to day campaigning can be an opportunity for members to bond and discuss issues distinct from the day to day matters of the campaign. By factoring into the campaign some mechanism for debriefing, members are less likely to feel overwhelmed by campaigning and therefore less likely to experience feelings of burnout.

#### ***RHOG’s experience of Burnout***

*When the Attorney General’s department rejected the Petition of Mercy, the devastation felt by the RHOG members was colossal. In the first instance, there was the grief felt for Heather and the fact that RHOG had failed in their principle aim. However the RHOG members also experienced feelings of grief on an individual level, but given the greater degree of concern regarding the finality of Heather’s situation, members were reluctant to express it. Burnout was definitely experienced by the RHOG members. Having suffered rejection after rejection along the way, the denial of the Petition of Mercy was the final straw, and shortly after this decision, the group dismantled.*

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, Pg 41

*Had the group engaged in debriefing strategies for their own support along the way, the RHOG may have guarded against the massive burnout that the members faced. Perhaps, by acknowledging during the campaign that the RHOG may not have been successful, when the final decision was handed down, it may not have been such devastation. Given the aim of the group was to release Heather, naturally during the campaign the RHOG were more concerned with how to support Heather over supporting themselves. The group could have safeguarded itself to a degree if it had organised some supervision or counselling along the way to help them cope with the final devastating outcome.*

### **Conclusions**

The processes, methods, tactics and strategies suggested in this guide are interwoven and can be used to strengthen and enhance a community activist group; its members, power and influence. A campaign that has maximised its potential for success is one that has defined the issues; created proactive agendas; established constructive relationships with elected officials; sought coalitions with other groups; suitably utilised today's technology; aligned the media with their campaign and adopt preventative measures - coping or contingency strategies in the case that the groups goals are not achieved.

Social advocacy groups must maintain their role in verbalising the nations plethora of interests. Most policy making power is in the hands of a small number of people at the top of the government and private sector.<sup>61</sup> Advocacy groups provide a direct association to these people on daily issues that affect or concern a specific proportion of the electorate, but not the nation as a whole. Community advocacy defines social justice in a political context.<sup>62</sup> Essentially, advocacy groups ensure that the divide between those with access to power in our society, and those without access does not become too great.

### **Final Comments on RHOG**

*Perhaps the Release Heather Osland Group can best be summed up by one of its members "I think one of the amazing things was that it continued to be active and consistent for such a long period of time....the campaign and individuals did have their ups and downs, but overall it remained fairly consistent".<sup>63</sup>*

*Over the duration of the campaign, members experienced the whole range of human emotions and reactions. People were angry at times, people were fired up and enthusiastic, there was positive intellectual rigour and studious application of a high level of creativity*

<sup>61</sup> Joan Kirner, *The Women's Power Handbook*. Ringwood, Vic. : Penguin, 1999. Pg 222

<sup>62</sup> Jeffery M Berry. 1984. Pg 29

<sup>63</sup> Debbie Kirkwood, 16 April, 2003

and endeavour.<sup>64</sup> There were also very dark times, when people sobbed, when faced with different rejection along the way.

*The RHOG campaign was always strategic, using a combination of approaches in an effort to achieve its ultimate aim. The group didn't try to 'reinvent the wheel' and made smart decisions along the way; opting to tap into and utilise existing networks to aid their work rather than going through the lengthy and time consuming process of generating their own. The group always tried to inject fun into the campaign. After the meetings they would go out for drinks, or coffee or food. Building fun and solidarity into the campaign made it that easier to deal with the hard subject matter and tough campaigning that the women were engaged in.*

*As a social advocacy campaign, the women of the RHOG are to be commended for their gallant efforts. The RHOG had complex and gruelling issues to confront and generate community understanding around, and in so doing, conducted themselves with dignity and the utmost professionalism. The campaign suffered set back after set back along the way and in the face of adversity and rejection, always remained optimistic. The RHOG was a close group of women who supported each other at every step of the way. Despite RHOG's unsuccessful attempts to have Heather released from prison, RHOG was a campaign whose members should indeed be entirely proud to have been a part of.*

*The women and their work carried out as part of the Release Heather Osland Group is an inspiration for hopeful social campaigners everywhere.*

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<sup>64</sup> Deb Davidson, 23 April, 2003

## **Contacts**

The following is a limited list of contacts for social advocacy in Melbourne:

To find your municipality and get information about participation, go to the Municipal Association of Victoria: <http://www.mav.asn.au>

Find your elected official: You can find your State and Federal elected official through <http://www.gov.au> and checking the parliamentary web site for the government you are seeking.

For parliamentarians, candidates and policies you can check the sites of the major parties

- Australian Democrats <http://www.democrats.org.au>
- Australian Labor Party <http://www.alp.org.au>
- The Liberal Party of Australia <http://www.liberal.org.au>
- National Party of Australia <http://www.npa.org.au>

Community Legal Centres: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/clc/>

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## Appendix 1

The following is a guide to community practitioners, directing their attention to a number of central factors to be taken into account when assessing community problems, and provides a course of action for attacking them. It should be noted that no two situations are exactly alike and that considerable flexibility must be exercised.<sup>65</sup>

### Preliminary Considerations

- A. *Summary of Assignment* Brief description of the workers assignment and developments leading to it, the agency etc. designed to introduce and make intelligible to the reader what follows.
- B. *Agency* (organisation employing the practitioner)
  - 1. Constitution and goal orientation (formal statement and informal 'understandings' of purposes, method)
  - 2. Constituency (those who control the agency) and resources (financial, professional and their social characteristics)
  - 3. Structure, formal and informal (governance and authority, social status and prestige, attachments to other groups)
  - 4. Program and its relation to workers assignment
- C. *Practitioner* (person employed by agency who is working on given problem)
  - 1. Motivation, capacity and opportunity to perform assigned tasks
  - 2. Role ambiguity, conflict, discontinuity and strain in the situation and their management

### II. THE PROBLEM

- A. Problem Analysis (as perceived by the practitioner)
  - 1. Nature: What specific kind of problem are you concerned about?
  - 2. Location: where is the problem? (Geographically, socially, psychologically, institutionally)
  - 3. Scope: Who (kinds of people, groups) are affected?
  - 4. Degree: How much are they affected?
- B. Past Change Efforts
  - 1. By whom?
  - 2. How effective
  - 3. Reasons for successes or failures
- C. *Perceptions of the problem by Significant Others* (individuals, groups, organisations)
  - 1. Who perceives the problem as the practitioner does?
  - 2. Who perceives it differently – as non-existent or insignificant, or as qualitatively different?

### III. Social Context of the Problem

- A. *Origins of the Problem* (where relevant)
- B. *Structural-Functional Analysis of the Problem*
  - 1. Social structures that maintain, increase, or reduce the problem
    - a. Societal, regional, state, local, neighbourhood
    - b. Formal Organisations, voluntary associations, primary groups
    - c. Power alignments, social/demographic factors.  
Ecological/economic relations, cultural/technological factors

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<sup>65</sup> A.F. Zander., 1990. Pg 117

2. Consequences of the problem for significant elements of the social structure – who gains, who loses. In what ways is the problem situation functional or dysfunctional for the maintenance of the groups having a stake in the problem

IV. THE CLIENT (the population segments or groups that are the primary beneficiary of the practitioners efforts)

- A. *Physical Location*, boundaries, size
- B. *Social, Economic, Political and Demographic Characteristics*
- C. *Formal Organisation of the Client*
- D. *Divisions and Cleavages* within the client
- E. *Significant Relations* with other parts of the social structure
- F. *Significant Changes* in the above, over time

V. GOALS

A. *Goals in Their Approximate Order of Priority* for dealing with the problem as identified by:

1. Agency
2. Client
3. Significant Others

B. *Practitioners Preferred Goals and Priorities* in the light of the above, including:

1. Task goals (goals related to task attainment regarding a substantive community problem)
2. Process goals (system maintenance and enhancement goals – social relationships, problem solving structures, and processes)

VI. STRATEGY. In light of preferred goals and priorities, consider two or three feasible strategies, in the following terms:

- A. *Minimum Tasks Required for Success*
- B. *The Action System* Identify the resources and supporting groups from within the agency, the client and significant others required to carry out strategy under consideration
- C. *Resistance* (opposition) and *Interference* (inertia, distraction)
  1. Identify opposing groups, their probable actions and impersonal difficulties which might be encountered
  2. Indicate how the strategy under consideration would cope with these
- D. *Evaluation of Practitioner's Ability to Utilise Strategy*
  1. Can minimum tasks be carried out and sustained?
  2. Can needed resources and supporting groups be mobilised, and their cohesion and goal-directed behaviour be maintained?
  3. Can resistance and interference forces be managed?
- E. *Preferred Strategy* Of the strategies considered, select one and give the rationale for this choice

VII. TACTICS

A. Gaining Initial Support

1. Entry – where does one start and with whom
  2. Leverage – what initial actions give one the best chance for sustaining one's strategy?
- B. Involving and Organising (or Reorganising) the Action System
1. Clarification of the problem, including gathering and interpretation of relevant data
  2. Clarification of role expectations of change agent, agency and various parts of the action system

3. Establishing a 'contract' (or basic agreement between the practitioner and these making up the action system)

#### C. Implementation of Action

1. Training and offering organisational and psychological support to the action system
2. Scheduling actions over time
3. Utilising available resources
4. Utilising 'Action-Reaction-Action' patterns (designing a sequence of actions to take advantage of anticipated responses)
5. Dealing with opposition, as necessary (confrontation, neutralisation, questioning legitimacy, bargaining etc)

#### VIII. EVALUATION

##### A. Success of Strategy in Problem Solving

##### *B. Effectiveness of Tactics*

#### IX. MODIFICATION, TERMINATION OR TRANSFER OF ACTION

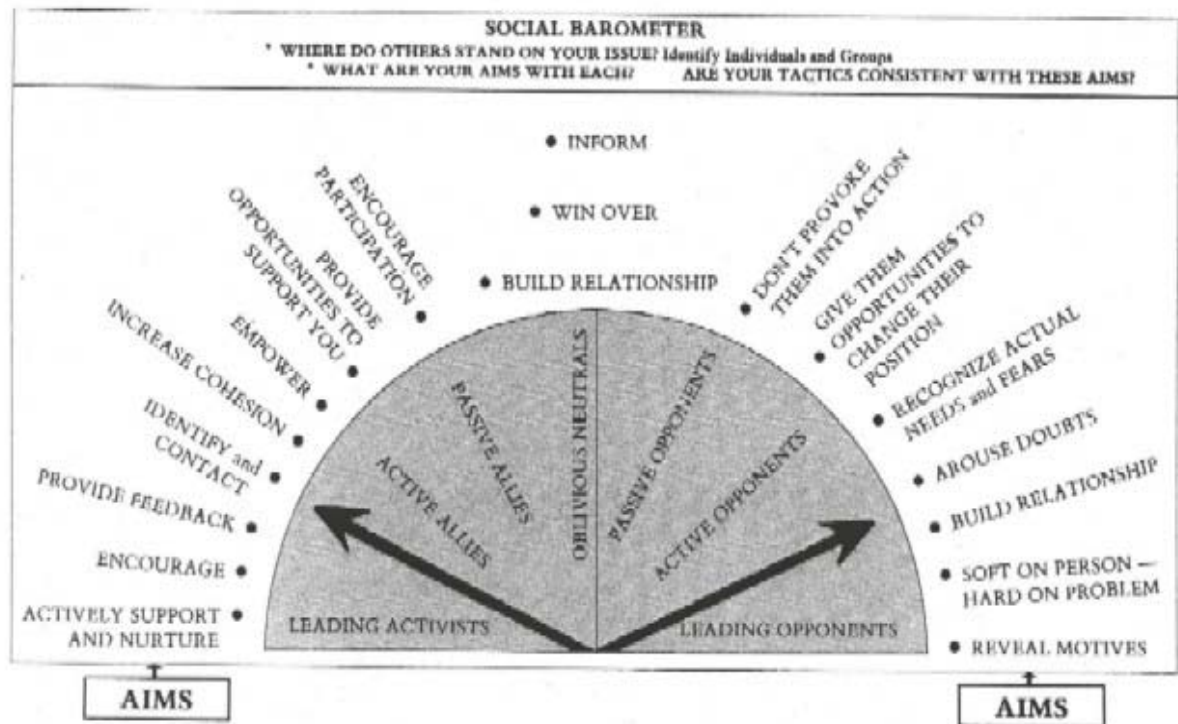
##### *A. Designing New Goals, Strategies or Tactics*

##### *B. Facilitating Termination or Modification of Practitioners Activity*

1. Disengaging practitioners from action system
2. Transferring relations to new practitioner
3. Maintaining or institutionalising change effort
4. Moving Action system toward terminal goal(s)

**Appendix 2:**

This diagram can be useful in working out how to deal with potential supporters<sup>66</sup>



I wish to acknowledge inspiration from David H. Albert: "People Power — Applying Non Violence Theory" New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, PA, 1985.

**Appendix 3:**

The following websites highlight the responsibilities of the three tiers of government:

- Local Government: <http://www.gov.au/sites/alga.html>
- State Government: <http://www.vic.gov.au/>
- Federal Government: <http://www.fed.gov.au/KSP/>

## Appendix 4:

Questions asked to RHOG members:

### *FUNCTIONING, MAKE UP, ACTUAL DAY TO DAY RUNNING*

Can you give me the background into your involvement in RHOG.....

- 1. To your mind, what was RHOG all about...?
  - How did you get members?
  - How did you inform people of your cause?
  
- 2. The release of Heather was obviously RHOG's primary objective, however often groups have other agendas they like to pursue on the side (like promoting equality, changing community responses to Battered Wife's Syndrome, effecting Legal Changes) Did RHOG have a strategy or a plan that went beyond releasing Heather?
  - Did this strategy change or evolve over time?
  - If yes, how/why?
  
- 3. One of the debates surrounding the RHOG campaign was whether to keep the group small thereby maintaining momentum and reducing the need to keep revisiting old ground, or to expand the group and include everybody that put their hand up to be involved. - What is a more effective structure - a critical mass or a small group? Why?
  - Does your approach to organising a social campaign change depending on the size of your group?
  
- 4. In reflecting on the RHOG campaign, what did you see as its strengths/weaknesses?
  - Were there any elements of the campaign that you thought should have been developed further?
  
- 5. Quite often a group can be characterised by a certain mood or feel. From the meetings, to the bus on the way to Canberra, to the courtroom, what was the general mood that characterised RHOG? As the campaign and trial progressed further, how did this mood change?
  
- 6. I know that Heather has been keen to talk to *Australian Story* about her case although she has been told if she does, she will be removed from low security back to Deer Park Maximum Security. So she's obviously reluctant to talk to the media until

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<sup>66</sup> Katrina Shields. 1994. Pg 146

her release. How difficult was it communicating with Heather whilst she was in prison?

- What barriers did these communication difficulties present?
- Did this influence RHOG's strategy at all?

#### *MORE SPECIFIC CRITIQUE OF RHOG CAMPAIGNING*

- 7. Whilst searching through newspaper articles and editorials there was indeed a great amount of support for the release of Heather. There was also however a select few that thought Heather 'got the punishment she deserved (refer to Paul Martin & James Weir in *The Age* and Jill Singer in *Herald Sun*).
  - From our perspective, Heather's case seemed so obviously unjust.
    - Why do you think there were such disparities between community attitudes?
    - Why was it that people like Weire, Martin and Singer, felt no compassion towards Heather's plight?
    - Do you think that any amount of RHOG campaigning could have changed those types of embedded beliefs?
- 8. The RHOG was essentially a campaign whos main aim focussed on one person. How difficult does a campaign become if it is focussed solely around one person?
  - Could this lead to bias based on personality rather than the issue at hand?
  - How does this influence your methods of campaigning?
- 9. Social activism is primarily motivated by idealist values which can be challenging to maintain in the face of a blatantly less than an ideal world. Burnout can therefore be a common problem of social activist groups. How do you deal with this problem?
  - What strategies do you employ to ensure that burnout is not a problem for your organisation?

#### Media

- 10. Often the belief is that media coverage will help generate public understanding and support of an activists position on a particular issue. This is not necessarily the case though. How does a campaign ensure that it has the best (most supportive) media coverage it could hope for?
  - How do you minimise the risk of the media misrepresenting your organisation on an issue - is that simply the chance one takes when talking with the media?

- 11. Although social activist organisations cannot totally control the medias final product, they can significantly influence it by choosing a skilled media spokesperson. What makes a skilled media contact?

*And Finally,*

- 12. Considering the long, arduous process - the conviction, Appeal of Conviction, the appeal to the HC, the petition of Mercy, do you think there is a place for social activism in cases like Heathers?
  - 13. If the RHOG didn't alter the outcome of Heather's case, how do you think the story has influenced other cases?
    - In a wider sense therefore, has Heather's story influenced public policy?
  - 14. As you know, this interview will be used in addition to other interviews with relevant RHOG members to put together a social activism guide. With the benefit of your experience and hindsight in RHOG, what would you say are the do's and don'ts of social activism?

Questions asked to Social Activist campaigners:

1. Grassroots organising is a personal 'hands on' approach to gathering people together in a community to take direct action on issues. Community awareness therefore is a key issue for concern when starting up a social activism group.
  - What are some of the most successful methods of generating community awareness of an issue?
2. It is often said that organisations are more likely to be effective if people have the opportunity for input and participation in the planning stages. However, finding a balance between various groups beliefs and aims can be difficult. Do you establish a decision making process in a group? If so, how?
3. In these days of high technology, social activism is enhanced by the speed of communication. How can groups use globalisation to enhance the process of social activism?
  - Do you think todays new communication methods have helped or hindered social activism?
4. Often groups have more than one agenda they like to pursue when campaigning (like community awareness, changing laws, public education). How does having multiple aims affect a campaign?

- Is it of greater benefit to have multiple strategies or can having too many goals, detract from the effectiveness of a campaign?

5. Although different groups have differing agendas, generally all social activist groups want to effect some sort of change in society. What are some of the key ingredients a campaign needs to maximise its potential for success?

*Media*

6. Often the belief is that media coverage will help generate public understanding and support of an activists position on a particular issue. This is not necessarily the case though. How does a campaign ensure that it has the best (most supportive) media coverage it could hope for?

- How do you minimise the risk of the media misrepresenting your organisation on an issue  
- is that simply the chance one takes when talking with the media?

7. Unfair or inaccurate media attention can be detrimental to social activist campaigns. However, responding to inaccurate claims can be just as damaging. How do you determine whether to respond or let inaccurate reporting slide?

Many thanks for your time.

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