

Grassroots Politics 101

To somewhat oversimplify the matter, there are two fundamental positions on politics. One, the position that is evident in the system of government in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), is that regular people are too stupid to be involved in politics beyond the act of voting every four years. This first view supposes that it is only the enlightened class of elites who are capable of understanding how the world works, and thus should be the ones to make all the decisions. This view might be called traditional politics, and is how NL has been run since Europeans settled here.

A second type of politics, in fact the opposite of this first elitist type, is grassroots politics. Grassroots politics assumes that regular people are not only capable, but absolutely should be involved in the political process. One of the most important tasks of the grassroots is to empower people to become politically active and to go about remaking the world in the ways they think best. But because empowering people is at odds with traditional politics, grassroots politics quite often starts as a form of resistance.

Grassroots politics is non-hierarchical; it does not have a command structure or an all-powerful leader or any strict doctrine. Instead, the purpose of grassroots politics is to create a forum in which regular people can express themselves, can build a new formal politics, and can work out ways to support one another through solidarity and mutual aid.

The non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian character of the grassroots gives it an authenticity that traditional politics lacks, but this also means that grassroots politics requires a great deal of commitment and faith in the capacity of regular people. There are bound to be some difficulties along the way, and there will sometimes be naysayers (a good answer for whom is to simply point to the abysmal failure of traditional politics and say, “certainly the grassroots can’t do any worse”).

Finally, grassroots politics needs to be relevant in the context of regular peoples’ lives. In recent weeks, a good deal of grassroots organizing has happened around demonstrations and protests (which are venues for people to express their views and to enact grassroots democracy). However, there are many other sorts of activities and actions grassroots organizers can do. Start a community-based library (or better yet, take back the community library the government intends to shut down); start a sharing network for clothes or food or labour; create community spaces where people can meet or can stay if they need to; really, whatever is needed. The best way to spread ideas about a new politics is by enacting it and bringing it into communities and into peoples’ lives.

Never ask permission from authorities and never let anyone tell you that you can’t do it. In the end, even as it is a difficult path, grassroots politics is always worth it because it is morally and ethically right that the people themselves should be the authors of their own destiny, not some entitled elites.