

Blocking Progress

Consensus Decision Making in the Anti-Nuclear Movement

by Howard Ryan¹

Consensus is a group decision-making method which is widely used in anti-nuclear, feminist, and environmental movements and in alternative businesses and communities. The method has been especially influential in the direct action wing of the anti-nuclear movement, where it has become an integral part of the nonviolent theory, culture, and politics defining the movement. Consensus applies the nonviolent notion of human unity to group decision making; as we will argue, it carries that notion to an illogical extreme. In fact, no practice greater hinders the anti-nuclear movement on a day-to-day level than does the consensus process.

Practical Problems

A group using consensus does not vote; rather, it discusses and amends proposals until everyone present agrees to them. Practically speaking, consensus is unanimous voting. This poses few difficulties for small groups when minor issues are under consideration, but it can create almost insurmountable difficulties in large groups, particularly when controversial issues are at stake. Every member of the group has the power to block a decision. When this occurs, the group has two choices: it can persuade the blocker to cease blocking, or it can search for alternatives which the blocker can accept. Although objectors are often encouraged to “stand aside”—to abstain rather than block—the potential power of blocking, even when it is not exercised, heavily influences the consensus process.

Groups making decisions by consensus tend to regard the process with a sort of spiritual reverence—I mean it is *worshipped*. The suggestion that even a straw vote be tried often brings reactions of hostility and moral indignation. The aura of morality discourages any objective analysis of the effects of consensus.

In practice, consensus can and often does frustrate the very purposes it is said to advance. The blocking mechanism undermines democratic decision making, while the requirement for unanimity can sometimes discourage the free expression of opinion. Consensus is a cumbersome process which drains the energy of a group and makes participation impossible for those unable to devote the many hours often required to come to a decision. The method can immobilize an organization, enhance the power of a tiny minority, and, in some cases, lead to the break-up of groups.

But there are important reasons why people are drawn to the process, as I was drawn to it when I entered the movement. I was introduced to consensus in 1977, in the Venice chapter of the Southern California Alliance for Survival (AFS). Consensus worked very

well in our group of ten; in fact, I had never felt more respected and cared for within a political organization, nor had any group ever listened to me more attentively. The consensus method added to our sense of cooperation and participation. This, joined with the excitement and dedication that came with being part of a new, mushrooming anti-nuclear movement, helped us to build a thriving chapter.

The experience of our group was not unique; many anti-nuke activists have reported similar benefits from consensus. In a society where many people, particularly working class people, have virtually no voice in the activities and institutions around them—where we are shaped into cogs of a great bureaucratic wheel—it is a precious feeling to be part of a community group where each person's opinion really matters. The right under consensus to block decisions seems to give an assurance that each person's opinion will always carry weight, that the group cannot erode the power of any individual. This is the special appeal of consensus.

The method nevertheless poses problems, and did so in AFS. Each month, our local chapter would send a "spoke" (spokesperson) to a regional AFS meeting. Consensus was the decision-making method in the regional meeting, where a participant could block only if the group s/he represented had "consented" to block on a particular point. As a result, blocks in the regional meeting posed almost insurmountable obstacles. Even if a compromise could be found that was agreeable to the blocking spoke, s/he would have to go back to his/her local group for approval. Then, the question would be reconsidered at the next monthly meeting. Proposals might bounce back and forth in this manner for months. Various remedies were attempted, such as arranging special meetings between the disputing parties, but nothing worked well. Regional decision making became increasingly frustrating. Occasionally, rather than allow the inaction to continue, the staff of the regional office would implement proposals even when they had been blocked. In these cases, the process which was designed to enhance the power of group members led to unilateral action by the staff. Although there was some grumbling about violating the process, most did not complain, as they preferred the violation to doing nothing at all. The frustrations of consensus finally led AFS to abandon it and adopt a voting model in late 1979.

Other anti-nuclear groups have been similarly frustrated by the consensus process, especially at the community or regional level of decision making. Mark Evanoff, tracing the history of Northern California's Abalone Alliance, notes that the organization has time and again been unable to achieve consensus on important statewide issues: "Organizers are [getting] burned out by statewide travel to meetings that produce no immediately tangible results."² Others have observed that the difficulty of reaching consensus contributed to a lack of political clarity in Washington's Crabshell Alliance: "In Fall 1977, Crabshell tried at several statewide meetings to clearly define its attitude toward nonviolence, one of Crabshell's basic principles. When no consensus could be reached, Crabshell gave up the effort."³ The Northern California Livermore Action Group had the same experience in 1982. (We will tell that story shortly.)

Advocates of consensus sometimes admit the method can be cumbersome. “Consensus takes time and patience,” advises a recent consensus manual.⁴ But the real consequences of this within political movements are seldom explored. It is not always possible to resolve differences among group members, particularly during a single meeting, even with sincere efforts to be patient, cooperative, and creative. It is sometimes impossible, therefore, to make vital decisions, and this weakens the solidarity of an organization. Even people who feel deep concern about the nuclear threat will leave the movement if it is unable to come to decisions and carry out activities.

Not only is consensus cumbersome, but it breeds conservatism and lowers the quality of decisions. It is a standard rule in the anti-nuclear movement that when a group cannot reach consensus, the last decision made on a subject remains in force. Thus, the difficulty of reaching unanimous agreement encourages political rigidity and lends inordinate power to those who oppose change. Moreover, in the effort to find a decision everyone will accept, good proposals tend to be watered down. Judith Van Allen recalls the efforts of the Berkeley-Oakland Women’s Union in 1971 to reach consensus on their principles of unity:

It just went on and on. There were so many different political viewpoints represented in the group that nobody was happy with the principles until they were such a mush that didn’t mean anything. I mean, it took the analysis out of it so that it was just vague and general. You know, we’re against everything bad and for everything good.⁵

Consensus means long, monotonous meetings. Meetings of four to six hours are quite regular occurrences in the Livermore Action Group (LAG). This not only burns people out, but also limits participation to those who can spare the time. Most Americans work at least forty hours a week, and many have families. They cannot devote the time that consensus demands. As a result, the power of movement activists who are single and have part-time or flexible jobs is enhanced, since they have time for the extended meetings. Consensus can foster a power elite within an organization.

Voting as an Alternative to Consensus

Proponents of consensus (some of whom concede that it causes some problems) argue that it is far more humane and democratic than alternatives such as majority vote, and that it is more consistent with visions of a cooperative society. Voting is widely portrayed as competitive and coercive. The *Diablo Canyon Blockade Handbook* states:

Voting is a win or lose model, in which people are more often concerned with the numbers it takes to “win” than with the issue itself. Voting does not take into account individual feelings or needs.⁶

A similar view is expressed in *Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making*:

Timid individuals or people who find it difficult to put ideas into words can be ignored.... The minority can easily be dispensed with by outvoting them. Although in theory everyone may participate in majority rule, in reality this method ensures less democracy than it seems to promise.⁷

People who have participated in groups that do vote suggest that this picture does not reflect the practices of community groups with a commitment to cooperation, although it does apply to many bureaucratic institutions and hierarchies (e.g., the U.S. Congress). Many voting groups try to avoid decisions by a slim majority, especially on major issues, and aim at as much unanimity as possible. For example, Matthew Hermann, who is active in a teachers' union and a member of Solidarity, a socialist-feminist group, reports:

I don't think I've ever experienced a vote in any organizations I've worked with using a strict voting method when there have been fifty-one/forty-nine votes and the organization hasn't seriously reconsidered what it was doing. Whereas the organization doesn't adopt consensus as a rule, people pretty much understand that a fifty-one/forty-nine vote means that there's a serious problem. Things have to be worked out.

We had our national convention for Solidarity this summer. And we had two very volatile issues. One was regroupment [joining with other national organizations] which involved a lot of concerns such as whether feminism was going to be taken seriously by these other groups. There were a lot of amendments made and when we finally took a vote it wasn't close; it was a large majority. The other major issue that was very difficult was the Central American question, specifically about Nicaragua. This was an issue that could have really split the organization badly. Instead of voting, which we didn't see as particularly appropriate at that time since there was so much disagreement, we mandated that there would be a study of this issue for the next six months. We would try to come to further agreement at that time. Some people were prepared to walk out of the organization if the vote was taken in a certain direction.

Some issues are important enough to split on. When Solidarity pulled out of NAM [New American Movement], it was clear we had very little in common with that other organization.* We did not want to go knocking on doors for Teddy Kennedy....But on a relatively minor issue, it doesn't make sense to split an organization over a vote. You can always pull away from votes.⁸

Jane Hunter, who is active with the Peace and Freedom Party and a member of the advisory board for KPFA (a progressive Berkeley radio station), explained that the John

* A reference to the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, with whom NAM combined to form the present Democratic Socialists of America.

Brown Club, a chapter of the Peace and Freedom party, makes special efforts to satisfy the concerns of minorities:

You see two or three people who are plugged in, who have been involved in the work over a period of time, who aren't happy, they're in a minority. What we do is take the time to stop and say, "What is it that's bothering you with this?" You vote and have a mandate to go forward but you also make sure you're not going to lose people as you go forward. We vote and then afterwards talk about why they're unhappy. We don't spend hours on it. We're talking about five minutes. And we'll make various changes as they're needed.

If five or six people in a minority raise their hand, then it's very Neanderthal to say, "OK, we have a majority. We're all going to do it. If you don't like it, tough shit." People who are reasonably progressive ought to have some kind of social foundation for their progressiveness. I mean, it doesn't all come out of your head, right? It does reflect in your life and how you are....You have the vote. If everyone's not satisfied, you work with it for a while. You make synthesis.⁹

David De Leeuw, a member of Workers' Power (a socialist group) and a long-time activist with Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU, a rank-and-file caucus in the Teamsters' Union) discussed his experience in voting groups and their approach to minorities:

The issue to me is, do you have some real political discussion of your decisions? Do you listen to what people have to say? The thing about consensus is it forces a certain amount of political discussion. It does it sort of artificially in some ways, but it means you have to listen to minority points of view in a serious way. And that's a good thing, it seems to me. But consensus can also get in the way of a movement acting effectively. I think you have to reach a stage where minorities do get listened to even if they get outvoted on something. You have to build up that sort of discussion and trust.

In the organizations I have been in, I have really, really rarely seen a substantial and upset minority just get voted down. Inevitably, people make concessions to them, think about what they're saying. If it's really too divisive, people will back off and not press the issue for awhile....

Ninety percent of what happens at Workers' Power or TDU in fact operates on consensus. Nine of ten decisions are made by votes that are unanimous. We're talking about groups of ten to thirty people. I actually think that most groups operate on consensus most of the time, even if they officially take a vote on things.¹⁰

Voting can be a more flexible way to make decisions than consensus. If the decision is important, and if the group feels a need for unanimity or a substantial majority, the time can be taken to discuss the issues and find a synthesis. But for smaller questions where unanimity is not essential, a vote can be quickly taken. On the other hand, if an important issue is at stake and time is limited—or if the group has grappled with a question for many hours and there is clearly an impasse—the group can decide whether it is more important to have further discussion or to vote and move on. With consensus, the standard rule is that no decision can be made until everyone is in agreement. Although people often stand aside when unanimity is impossible, the consensus process can and does immobilize groups.

The Myth of Non-Coercion

Consensus is widely claimed to be a non-coercive, democratic decision-making method. D. Elton Trueblood explains that the Quaker method of decision making (the major source of the consensus process) involved “the use of love and persuasion as against force and violence. The overpowering of a minority by calling for a vote is a kind of force” which breeds resentment.¹¹ Similarly, the *Wall Street Action Training Handbook* states:

Consensus allows us to recognize our areas of agreement and to act together without coercing one another. *Under consensus, the group takes no action that is not consented to by all group members.*¹² (emphasis in original)

These claims are overstated. In truth, voting and consensus can both involve forms of coercion, i.e., forcing one party to accept the decision of another. The difference is that the will of the majority holds sway in voting, while an individual or minority wields power in consensus. Proponents of consensus often fail to recognize that preventing people from doing as they wish can be no less coercive than forcing them to do as they do not wish.

Often, when an individual or minority blocks a decision, the alternatives available to the group are limited. As a result, concessions are often given and agreements made with which few are comfortable because the alternative is immobilization. It is important to note that a block need not actually take place for this coercion to occur. Once an individual has voiced opposition to a proposal, particularly a strong opposition, a *potential* block exists and the group is well aware of this. The group is often forced to make concessions to the individual to avoid a block which *may* occur. Hence, the individual wields immense power over the group whether or not a block is exercised.

An incident in LAG before the June 1982 blockade at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory (where nuclear weapons are designed) illustrates many of the failings of consensus. LAG had adopted verbatim the Abalone Alliance nonviolence code. Many LAG members were uncomfortable with the guideline which read, “Our attitude will be one of openness, friendliness, and respect toward all people we encounter.” They

objected on the grounds that oppressed people often do not feel open, friendly, and respectful toward authorities such as the police, and that such feelings should not be a requirement for joining the blockade. A month-long series of talks on the issue was capped by two full days of informal, open discussion. Finally, a recommendation was made to strike the words “friendliness and respect” and say simply that our attitude would be “open and nonviolent.”¹³ Matthew Hermann tells of the consensus process which this entailed:

It was clear that people were not happy with the code. It had that clause that said we will be open, friendly, and respectful—like the boy scouts. So we get to this meeting and we start talking about it and talking about it and talking about it as happens in every LAG meeting, with no sense of direction or how it’s going to be resolved. Finally, Eric, who’s another member of Solidarity, asked that a straw poll be taken to see what the general impression in the room was. Well, this was a very radical proposal within LAG. We debated for two hours whether we would take a poll or not.

I asked Hermann if he was exaggerating. He said he was not.

And finally we took a poll. The vote was seventy-four to two in favor of changing the nonviolence code. One of the two people blocked it. He was asked repeatedly to stand aside, to leave, to die. People were just so upset. He wouldn’t budge and it was blocked. His reasons for blocking were just the traditional radical pacifist positions. He could not work in an organization that did not have these principles.¹⁴

I have endured similar “consensus nightmares,” although they are not typically as extreme as the case just described. It is especially grueling when a group is unable to reach consensus on questions of procedure (such as the debate on the straw vote described above). Few experiences are more personally demeaning or collectively debilitating. The kind of power wielded by the blocker in the LAG meeting had nothing to do with democracy* or fairness. It is argued that consensus ensures that decisions will not violate anyone’s moral values or ignore individual needs. It is true that the morals and needs of the LAG blocker were not violated. But what about the needs of the seventy-four people who favored changing the code?

Some proponents of consensus might discount tales of horrible blocked meetings as being the rare exception. *In fact, every block involves abuse, unfairness, and coercion of the larger group.* And even when the right to block is not exercised, its threat is present. The possibility of a block affects a group’s decision-making process, and that, too, is abusive.

* Democracy, as it is used here, means “rule by the people.” It is derived from the Greek words *demos* (the people) and *kratein* (to rule).

Consensus is often defended as a process which works if people act “responsibly.” “The power to object and block consensus should be used responsibly and sparingly,” the *Wall Street Handbook* advises. “Block consensus only for serious, principled objections....”¹⁵ But is it ever responsible to exercise that sort of power over a group? The problem is not so much that individuals act irresponsibly or somehow abuse the consensus process. The problem lies in giving individuals that kind of power in the first place. Consensus turns majority rule into minority rule. That’s not democracy.

Discussion and Participation

Advocates have held that consensus allows every individual a voice in the decision-making process. “Since the goal is group unity, rather than beating the opposition,” says *Building United Judgment*, “every member is considered important and the group tries to listen to and respond to each person. Everyone’s support is needed, so the softer voices that might be drowned out in a competitive situation are encouraged and attended to.”¹⁶ I have found that consensus frequently has the reverse effect. By establishing the goal of total unity and seeking to satisfy all objections before taking action, consensus works to discourage disagreement and presentation of controversial issues. When the agenda is busy or when it’s been a long night, it often seems prudent to keep quiet and let things pass rather than to raise an objection which might take another hour to resolve. The knowledge that the entire group must be won to a position, and, in some cases, that certain individuals are certain to block it, often makes one suspect it is not worthwhile to put forward a minority view. Blocking, on the other hand, is a very risky act, especially at larger organizational meetings and conferences. The spotlight is suddenly on the blocker, who had better be prepared for heavy grilling. Consensus etiquette forbids pressuring blockers, but it happens regularly. When one person keeps the whole group from moving forward, it is understandable that some people will grow impatient.

Tension underlies many consensus meetings. People are afraid someone will block or object, and it will then be necessary to spend more time struggling with a question. Voting, because it does not require complete unity, makes it easier for people to disagree. Moreover, a person who objects to a proposal in a consensus meeting is expected to speak up and explain why. Many people find this intimidating, especially at large political meetings. In voting, it is necessary only to raise one’s hand for or against. This means that those who are shy or new to a group can participate without having to explain or defend their position before the group. Especially in the large meeting, consensus allows the braver or more experienced activists to be heard, but the position of the quieter people is often never known (there is not always time to go one by one around the circle). Using straw votes to find out where everyone stands would, of course, alleviate this problem; straw voting could be used within a consensus framework.

The general advantage of voting is that it recognizes that conflicts and differences cannot always be resolved, especially within a single meeting. It allows decisions to be made and the work of a group to go forward while internal conflicts continue. Voting

ultimately allows more issues and concerns to be aired, while consensus unintentionally suppresses conflict and discourages open debate.

The Small Group Solution?

The problems of consensus are most clearly seen at large meetings. Even when blocking is modified to require the support of x number of persons, it still involves an unfair coercion of the majority by a minority. The problem is lessened in small groups of less than ten or so who work together regularly and are reasonably like-minded. In fact, small task-oriented groups often require no formal process at all, consensus *or* voting. For example, I worked with a newsletter group ranging from four to eight people as part of the East Bay Anti-Nuclear Group in Berkeley. In over a year of working together, I don't believe we had any disagreements that required more than five minutes to resolve. Some might propose that consensus would work if the movement simply had lots of autonomous small groups doing independent projects. This is, in fact, what anti-nuclear groups often do, since running a larger organization seems so hopeless under current practices.

But this is not a solution. Without a broader organization to unify local groups, map out common strategy, coalesce with other groups and movements, bring in volunteers, provide resources, share skills, and bring together the strength of many people, the movement cannot seriously challenge its powerful and well-organized opposition. Moreover, a well-functioning large organization can provide a sense of wider community and shared purpose and direction for small local groups. These elements are essential. Where they are lacking, small groups become isolated and dispirited. They often fail to generate activity, and then they break apart.

It is true, however, that consensus usually works within small local groups, apart from the larger organization. Even if the group officially voted, consensus would probably emerge most of the time. But consensus can cause real problems even in small groups whose members have significant philosophical differences. For a movement that hopes to grow, that expects diversity, and that wants to develop clarity on questions of strategy and politics, consensus is not useful.

Sources of the Consensus Method

The anti-nuclear movement owes its consensus process primarily to the tradition of the Quakers, or Society of Friends, and to the feminist movement. These respected predecessors seem at first glance to provide evidence that the process is proven and worthwhile. But a closer look shows that the Quakers' group process does not readily apply to anti-nuclear groups, since the two groupings differ radically in character and in their decision-making requirements. We also find that feminist groups relying on consensus have been often troubled by the process, and that many feminists prefer voting.

Two organizations—Movement for a New Society and American Friends Service Committee—have been especially influential in introducing consensus to the anti-nuclear movement. Both grow from the Quaker tradition: MNS is a nonviolent training network whose organizational predecessor was A Quaker Action Group; AFSC is the social service arm of the Quakers. The Quaker method of consensus, which dates from their founding in 1652, is based on the Quaker religious conception. Quaker prayer involves “waiting upon the Lord” until “the Light” reveals itself within us. “In the Light wait where the Unity is, where the peace is, where the Oneness with the Father and Son is, where there is no Rent nor Division,” wrote Friends’ founder George Fox.¹⁷ In group decision making, while there is of course practical discussion, Quakers ultimately rely on “the Light Within producing unity,” explains Howard H. Brinton.¹⁸ “There is but one Light and one Truth....The nearer the members of a group come to this one Light, the nearer they will be to one another....”¹⁹ Hence, the Quakers reject voting because it involves division, thereby keeping them from reaching a spiritualistic unity.

From examination of the Quakers, one can see that the consensus process grows from a religious vision of a divine realm of unity and truth: to approach this realm is to approach the Lord. Some activists practicing consensus today share this belief in a divine realm of unity, and many do not. But all who practice consensus should understand that the method was developed for religious reasons.

It should be stressed that there are important differences between the practice of consensus in Quaker groups and its use in the anti-nuclear movement. Quaker business meetings have a religious character. “There is much greater effort to find what is best for the group as a whole in terms of our identity with God. People are less likely to press for their own needs as individuals as often happens in groups like LAG,” observes Margaret Mossman, Northern California Friends clerk. She says that people’s comments are often followed by silences, sometimes as long as three to five minutes. In twelve years of involvement with the Friends, Mossman recalls only four times when an individual blocked, or “stood in the way” of a decision.²⁰ Quaker groups have a high level of intimacy and shared values. Newcomers must attend meetings for a year or two before they are fully accepted in the Society. Also, it is easier to postpone difficult questions in a Friends’ meeting than in political groups which are generally preparing for an upcoming demonstration or responding to an immediate crisis. By all accounts, consensus has served the Quakers well in over three centuries of practice. But the decision-making requirements in an action-oriented mass political movement where people come and go, and where daily struggles over political differences and conflicts are the rule, are radically different from that of an enclosed, cohesive religious community.

The second major source of the anti-nuke movement’s consensus process is the feminist movement. Consensus became part of the model of “participatory democracy” adopted by young feminists in the late 1960s. In fact, many activists equate consensus with “feminist process.”²¹ Citing feminist theorist Joan Rothschild, MNS writers Bruce Kokopeli and George Lakey argue that consensus is “the mode of decision-making most consistent with the feminist concept of freedom: interdependence, including self-realization and support for others.”²² It is incorrect, however, to identify consensus with

feminism. The many feminist groups who use voting rather than consensus are hardly being “less feminist” because of it. On the contrary, because it enables a minority to exert power over a majority, consensus is inconsistent with such feminist goals as equality and eliminating the abuse of power.

The model of participatory democracy, moreover, is neither new nor necessarily feminist. Jo Freeman, writing in the feminist journal *Chrysalis*, points out that feminists borrowed the group style of participatory democracy primarily from the sixties’ New Left, which was not known for its feminism, and that it has been a recurring theme in American social movements.²³ Participatory democracy attempted to eliminate the distinction between leaders and followers, to emphasize personal involvement and informality over bureaucratic structures. The leaderless, structureless approach was well suited to women’s consciousness-raising and rap groups. But it led to problems for women’s political groups similar to those experienced in the anti-nuclear movement. The feminist attempt to counter, through the use of consensus, the coerciveness and personal disregard many women had experienced in the New Left only created new forms of coercion which enabled individual women to disregard the needs of groups of women. Moreover, as Joreen (aka Jo Freeman) points out in her influential essay, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” the abdication of formal leadership merely gave more room for informal cliques and hidden leaders who were more difficult to monitor and to hold responsible to the group because they could not be appointed or removed.²⁴

The experience of A Woman’s Place Bookstore, a collectively-run feminist bookstore in Oakland, California, illustrates the problems feminists have faced with consensus even in very small groups. In the early 1980s, the six-woman collective became split into factions of two and four, debating such questions as the store’s political focus. The four members who wanted the store to serve as a catalyst for coalition building were opposed by the other two members who preferred a separatist posture. Compromises could not be found, and the faction of two frequently blocked decisions. The collective’s disputes finally led to a court battle, and the minority of two was forced to resign from the store. Afterwards, the store established a “fail-safe” policy in its decision-making process: if consensus were blocked, the group could choose to override the block or could question the blocker’s suitability as a member of the collective.²⁵

Anti-nuclear groups often emulate what is done in the feminist movement on the assumption they are practicing “feminist process.” But many types of group and organizational styles come under the umbrella of the feminist movement, and within the movement there is an ongoing debate on issues of leadership, power, and the meaning of feminist process.²⁶ If the anti-nuclear movement borrows uncritically from the feminist movement, it will forego the benefit of learning from feminists’ past mistakes.

Middle Class Bias and the Need for Trust

Consensus reflects a middle class bias in a number of ways. It is in accord with the fears of conflict and desires for social harmony (even false harmony) which are hallmarks of

middle class social education. It is suited to privileged groups of people who can spend many long hours just “being with the process” and who may have little personal investment in actually making decisions which will lead to social change. It reflects middle class individualistic values which lead to putting one’s personal interest and needs above those of the group. In other words, it may be difficult for middle class people to place their trust in a group. This lack of group trust is a major obstacle to the use of a voting model in organizations which presently use consensus.

There are other obstacles to the use of a voting model in direct action anti-nuclear organizations. These include moralistic beliefs about the inherent goodness of consensus and the evil of voting, as well as the near impossibility of reaching consensus on doing away with consensus (a built-in catch-22 feature of consensus). Also, many activists lack experience with the use of majority vote in a cooperative context. But the need for greater trust is the most essential. Consensus advocates often speak of the importance of group trust but, ironically, mistrust is actually at the foundation of the consensus method. Consensus is based on the assumption that unless people are given the power to block, the group as a whole will not listen to them and their needs will be ignored. There is much in our society and in our experiences to validate such fears. But I believe there is enough humanity and caring within the ranks of the anti-nuclear movement to warrant some trust.

Conflict between individual and group needs is inevitable. A democratic process should give the group, not the individual, final say about the way the conflict will be handled, the compromises to be made, and where the balance will be struck. Movement activists need to begin to trust their groups, which means trusting ourselves, to make decisions in a sensitive and cooperative way. While voting is no panacea and can be abused, as can any group process, it is at least one essential element in a democratic process and in an effective organization.

¹ “Blocking Progress” was published as a pamphlet in 1983. A condensed version appeared in *Chain Reaction* (Australia), April 1984. See also the review by former MNS member Steve Chase, “The Case Against Consensus,” *Communities* (U.S.), fall 1984. Howard Ryan can be reached at howard@netwood.net.

² Mark Evanoff, “Abalone Story,” *It’s About Times* (Nov/mid-Dec 1980) p. 7. Newspaper of the Abalone Alliance, San Francisco.

³ Steve Leigh and Glenn Talaska, “Building an Effective Movement,” *Nuclear Times* (Mar 1979). Published by Live Without Trident, Seattle, WA.

⁴ Michael Avery et al., *Building United Judgment: A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making* (Madison, WI: Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981) p. 55.

⁵ Interview with the author, Nov 1982, Berkeley, CA.

⁶ *Diablo Canyon Blockade/Encampment Handbook* (Santa Cruz, CA: Northern California Preparers/Trainers Collective, 1980) p. 14.

⁷ Avery et al., *Building United Judgment*, p. 5.

⁸ Interview with the author, Nov 1982, Berkeley, CA.

⁹ Interview with the author, Nov 1982, Berkeley, CA.

-
- ¹⁰ Interview with the author, Aug 1982, Berkeley, CA.
- ¹¹ D. Elton Trueblood, "The Quaker Method of Reaching Decisions," in *Beyond Dilemmas: Quakers Look at Life*, ed. S.B. Laughlin (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1937) p. 118-19.
- ¹² *The Wall Street Action Training Handbook, October 29, 1979* (New York: War Resisters League, 1979) p. 27.
- ¹³ See *Livermore Weapons Lab Blockade/Demonstration Handbook, June 21, 1982* (Berkeley, CA: Livermore Action Group, 1982) p. 32.
- ¹⁴ Interview with the author, Nov 1982, Berkeley, CA.
- ¹⁵ *Wall Street Handbook*, p. 27.
- ¹⁶ Avery et al., *Building United Judgment*, p. 6.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years: The History and Beliefs of the Society of Friends Since George Fox Started the Quaker Movement* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1976) p. 20.
- ¹⁸ same, p. 109, 121-22.
- ¹⁹ same, p. 106.
- ²⁰ Interview with the author, Mar 1983, Berkeley, CA.
- ²¹ Examples are *Livermore Blockade Handbook*, p. 39; *Diablo Blockade Handbook*, p. 12; *Blockade the Bombmakers: Civil Disobedience Campaign Handbook, June 14, 1982* (New York: War Resisters League, 1982) p. 11.
- ²² Bruce Kokopeli and George Lakey, "Leadership for Change," *WIN* (2 Nov 1978) p. 13.
- ²³ Jo Freeman, "Crises and Conflicts in Social Movement Organizations," *Chrysalis* 5 (spr 1977) p. 45.
- ²⁴ Joreen, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," in *Radical Feminism*, eds. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle, 1973) p. 285-99.
- ²⁵ These events were described to me by two members of the bookstore collective.
- ²⁶ Besides the articles by Jo Freeman/Joreen (notes 23 and 24 above), see the spring and winter 1976 issues of *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*. The spring issue is on "Leadership,"; the winter, on "Organization and Strategies." Especially good, and written for the peace movement, is Norma Becker, "Beyond the Abdication of Power," *WIN* (7 Dec 1978) p. 4-10.

This document hosted 7/13/2007 with author's permission at
<http://www.docspopuli.org/pdfs/consensus.pdf>

Docs Populi – Documents for the Public
<http://www.docspopuli.org>