

## Participative ecology

*Ever wondered how Friends of the Earth (FoE) differs from other campaign groups? Or what it's like to represent the views of 100,000 people in the public sphere? Simon Hodgson gets some rapid-fire answers from its Director, Tony Juniper.*

Tony Juniper is a man in a hurry. We've agreed half an hour, but the day of our interview sees Gordon Brown and David Cameron making tit-for-tat press announcements in a continued attempt to 'out green' one another. The media need an independent voice, and Juniper's day has been reorganised to cope with the demand for comment. As we speak his press officer bustles around setting up what sound like 15-minute interview slots with two TV channels. My half-hour seems remarkably luxurious.

Nonetheless, Juniper is speaking quickly. He's answering my questions skilfully and constructively, but I can't escape the feeling that he's going to do this a dozen times today. So it is perhaps inevitable that there's a certain rehearsed quality to his responses.

Yes, he says, he took over as Director of FoE (England, Wales and NI) in 2003 – an internal promotion after 13 years with the organisation – and it's the public cut and thrust that drives him. "The thing that's always kept me inspired about FoE is the campaigning," he explains. "Campaigning is what the organisation exists for, not to have a good bank balance or cutting edge HR procedures – although we do have that. It's quite important to have the Director being seen in the outside world as a mover and shaker, rather than someone who manages processes on the inside."

His roots in FoE go deep – beyond long service into a deep pride in the very fundamentals of its character. "It's been going for a long time," he explains, "and has had a period of very high public profile and a lot of political impact, but it has always managed to remain independent and honest to its core values. Sometimes that is quite difficult for organisations



FoE Director Tony Juniper

that do start to get 'glammed up'."

Juniper goes on to recite the offers that FoE gets from large companies and others to come on side with their latest environmental initiatives, lending its brand and stamp of respectability. "It would be easy for an organisation that wasn't paying attention to finish up not being as credible or independent as it could be, but we've managed to hang on to that," he asserts.

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How so? Why does he think FoE has been so successful in this regard? "It's the grass roots," he answers, promptly, referring to the very 'bottom up' nature of FoE's organisation. "The local groups do keep us on our toes. They bring to attention issues that may not necessarily be picked up by the management. The classic example is the GM crops issue,

which was picked up by our local groups a year ahead of the public wave. Just in time. They put a resolution through our annual meeting saying 'we should campaign on GM Crops'. We had a bit of spare capacity, and we did it and it worked."

This participatory style is very critical to the organisation. "It's one of the big differences between Greenpeace, which is centralised and directed internationally, and FoE which is decentralised and is a grass roots organisation globally. Those two models do lead to quite profound differences between the two institutions; different ways of working and different ways that the campaigns are pitched. Hopefully it remains complementary, with, on the one hand, the resource directed towards dramatic interventions based on direct action, and our way which is more about building a demand for change from the bottom up, speaking to politicians in constituencies as well as in national parliaments."

"This is not just about a lobbying outfit having relationships with ministers and special advisors," Juniper goes on. "It's about us having a representative locus

out there – 100,000 supporters, all the local groups, all the people we talk to – we want to bring their views in. Having that kind of political grounding is very important.”

Juniper appears ageless: the white hair and creases round the eyes say ‘older’, but his energy says ‘younger’. His open-necked casual shirt has seen better days and I find myself wondering – like some misplaced mother figure – whether he’s actually planning to go on TV wearing it. He sits in a cluttered little office, decorated with FoE posters and colour plates of parrots.

Parrots? Juniper started out with a degree in animal behaviour and an MSc in conservation. The last flowering of his career as a working ecologist is his famous Guide to Parrots of the World (written with Mike Parr), the definitive field reference. And indirectly they got him his current job.

“I came in to FoE from Birdlife International, where I was working on parrots in particular. That group of birds is going extinct principally because of

deforestation, and being engaged in that issue from the technical and scientific perspective I was struck that that probably wouldn’t do the job. A lot of it is about politics and economics, it doesn’t really matter what the science says.” So he was delighted to get the job as tropical forest campaigner at FoE. Seventeen years later, he’s still there.

And what’s it like, this job? He works in London and lives in Cambridge. “It’s quite tough, it is quite a punishing job in trying to keep some time for family. The phone goes all the time, Saturday and Sunday. Even if I do get a weekend, the media generally are calling. It is pretty much a 24-7 job, although sleep does happen most days.” He laughs – an extraordinary giggle and quite out of character with his fast paced, earnest vocal style. “I don’t think it’s a particularly good way of carrying on, to be honest with you, and maybe one day I can restore a bit more balance there.”

His PA pops in – he has another 30-minute meeting before embarking on his TV studio tour – reinforcing the

impression that work-life balance will always be hard to find in his current job. So I ask him what he might move to next and, for once, he hesitates in his answer.

“I don’t know what I’ll do next. All my professional work has been conservation, ecology, environmental stuff and so being Director of FoE is a kind of high point, really. Doing something that feels like it’s a logical step forward is going to be hard to find.”

And when that happens, what would he like his epitaph to be? The rapid-fire pace returns: “We did do an awful lot,” he suggests. And then adds with that full-on laugh, “and a lot of it worked as well!”

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