

The hashtag crusaders

Since she first set out on a course of social activism well over four decades ago, Helen Caldicott's dedication to the anti-nuclear cause has taken her to some unusual places.

Perhaps no twist in her journey, though, was more unexpected than the one that took her in early 1982 to United States president Ronald Reagan's White House via the Playboy Mansion, the Los Angeles pleasure palace of Hugh Hefner.

To explain how it happened, we must go back a little further to a chance meeting after an anti-nuke symposium elsewhere in LA.

"A woman approached me. She said her name was Pat Kingsley," recalls Caldicott. "She was the key."

Kingsley was Hollywood's most powerful publicist, and she was so moved by Caldicott's message that she offered her services free.

Caldicott already had a substantial profile, but with Kingsley's help it really took off. Kingsley paired Caldicott up with some of the biggest stars of the day, and used her contacts to get them on all the biggest TV talk and current affairs shows.

"She used the film stars as a hook to hang me on," says Caldicott.

And thus the Australian paediatrician, who took her first steps to activism in Adelaide a decade earlier, fell in with the Hollywood A-listers, and was, among other things, invited to speak at the Playboy Mansion.

"Paul Newman was there," she recalls. "I'd never met him and he came up and kissed my hand. I just about fainted at his feet, he was just so beautiful."

In her address, Caldicott invited the film stars to go outside, look at the real stars and contemplate the probability that while Earth held the only life in the universe, it was threatened by the madness of nuclear weapons. Some wept.

"And afterwards this girl came up and said, 'I think you might be the only person who can change my father's mind,'" says Caldicott.

It was Patti Davis, the daughter of then-president Reagan.

A meeting was duly arranged, one on one, in Reagan's bookless library. They had lunch and talked about the nuclear threat. Reagan was hazy on his facts; Caldicott would correct him.

"He'd get quite flustered and his cheeks would flush, so I held his hand to reassure him," she says.

Literally?

"Yes, for much of the time. I literally established a doctor-patient relationship with him."

But neither the weight of her facts nor the warmth of her touch won him over.

Dr Caldicott came away from the meeting having made three diagnoses: Reagan was not very bright – she assessed his IQ to be "about 100, very average"; he was showing the early signs of Alzheimer's disease; and he was unshakable in his belief that the best way to avoid nuclear war was not disarmament but deterrence.

Nonetheless, there were still reasons for great hope then. That same year, Caldicott addressed the biggest anti-nuke rally ever in America – an estimated million people in New York's Central Park. Activist organisations were proliferating spectacularly. As founding president of Physicians for Social Responsibility (1978-1983), she helped attract 23,000 American doctors to the cause. Another organisation with which she was deeply involved, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, won the Nobel peace prize in 1985. Surely change was coming.

But 30 years later, as she grimly notes, there are still 16,400 nuclear weapons extant, of which Russia and America have 94 per cent. They can still blow up the world.

That's no indictment of her efforts. Her dedication has been heroic. Even now, at 76, she continues to write, to hold symposia, to run the Helen Caldicott Foundation for a Nuclear Free Future, to advocate for her cause. She will be among a who's who of advocates for progressive causes, including US National Security

Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden and anti-family violence campaigner Rosie Batty, speaking to 1200 people gathered in Melbourne over coming days to discuss issues and techniques at the Progress 2015 conference. (Full disclosure: *The Saturday Paper's* editor, Erik Jensen, was also a speaker.)

The point is, Caldicott soldiers on. And she worries a bit about an apparent dearth of new, young people prepared to commit to long-haul campaigning.

"Kids don't do it," she says. "They're all on their cell phones, and texting each other and playing on Twitter and Facebook."

It's a common lament, that in a world with an increasingly short attention span, we see the rise of instant protest as a substitute for concerted progressive action. There are words for the phenomenon: slacktivism, clicktivism, hashtag activism.

There are many examples. Boko Haram kidnaps 200 schoolgirls in Nigeria and #BringBackOurGirls appears and goes viral. All over the world people take selfies while holding signs, and feel good about themselves. And nothing changes.

Should those concerned about effecting real progressive change worry that simple identity politics is supplanting real commitment?

Or have the means of expression simply changed? Maybe the hashtag is the digital age equivalent of the bumper sticker, and the online petition the equivalent of the street march. Maybe younger people are just as committed – in many cases marginally committed – as they ever were.

If that's the case, the future for progressive change organisations is perhaps not so dire. Certainly more people respond to hashtags than ever put stickers on their cars. Proportionally, many more people have signed on to GetUp! petitions in Australia than rallied in Central Park in 1982.

"Change.org has 2.8 million people

who have used their platform, so it's not a small proportion of the population at all," says Rebecca Wilson, deputy director of the Centre for Australian Progress, the organisation hosting the Melbourne conference.

On the other hand, she says: "Every organisation that has an email list will tell you their membership is heavily female and middle aged or older. So it's partially true that it's often older people engaging. But they have the time and the resources."

The evidence is ambiguous. What is increasingly clear, though, is that while modern means of communication such as social media can be a powerful tool, they are not a substitute for more traditional means of activism. And those seeking change face the same old problem of turning short-term protest into long-term campaigning.

"It's too reductionist to say that there is clicktivism and then there is legitimate advocacy," says Anat Shenker-Orsorio, a US-based communications consultant specialising in cognition and linguistics.

There is, she says, "some truth" to the criticism that if you make something too easy you encourage a glib and superficial response. "But the issue is actually a lack of human-to-human engagement. The thing that sustains motivation is the creation of connection and community. The trouble with online actions is that they don't engender that connection."

"We have for too long focused on protest instead of movement building."

Annie Kia, community engagement co-ordinator for the anti-fracking Lock the Gate Alliance, emphasises the point.

"Lock the Gate has raised a very powerful social movement because we work the grassroots – face-to-face conversations, lots of door-to-door engagement, stalls, leafleting towns, inviting people to meetings. It's important to get people to group up, to self-organise. That brings dynamism.



MIKE SECCOMBE is *The Saturday Paper's* Sydney correspondent.

"We have something the corporations don't, which is collective intelligence. They have PR departments."

The other important thing, she says, is to have a clear focus on an issue, particularly when your movement encompasses a variety of people. In Lock the Gate's case, that ranges from conservative farmers to unreconstructed hippies. "It would be true that many of our supporters are very supportive of a variety of other issues, but we stick to our issue."

Social media is a great help in organising, but, says Kia, much of what they do harks back to the techniques "of Gandhi and Martin Luther King – non-violent civil disobedience".

That's not to say hashtag activism cannot be a powerful force, particularly when you are trying to begin a discussion on an uncomfortable issue, says Wilson.

She cites the case of Michael Brown, the black man shot last year in Ferguson, Missouri, despite the fact he was unarmed and apparently surrendering to police.

#HandsUpDontShoot, she says, "completely changed" the debate about relations between US police and citizens of colour.

"It positioned Mike Brown as the victim, not the aggressor," she says.

And it focused attention on the actions of the increasingly militarised police forces of the US, and brought media scrutiny and institutional response. When Freddie Gray died in police custody last month, six police officers were charged with homicide.

"At the heart of change is getting stories to people, and technology helps us get more stories to people," Wilson says.

It's a matter of matching the medium to the message.

"Digital means are tactics," says David Ritter, CEO of Greenpeace Australia Pacific. "There is no question that a brand campaign on a major corporation, that spreads through social media, works. There are multiple examples of corporations moving."

Similarly, he has no problems with

hashtag support "when it is an expression of support for someone like Gillian Triggs, whose reputation is being unfairly trashed".

"You are associating your name with her reputation," he says. "An example of where it hasn't worked is something like where it's things like 'Bring back our girls'. The girls were not brought back.

"There is no doubt a whole lot of it [social media messaging] is just about self-expression. People communicating that they are a particular kind of person.

"That can have political effect, or it might not, depending on the issue. I would still rather see people doing that than nothing at all, but we shouldn't imagine the consequences are greater than they are.

"What I am always interested in is how you effectively, peacefully, confront power, because it is the status quo that has us on an unsustainable path.

"You confront power in many ways by cultivating the elite, or being out on the street, or by litigation, or many other ways including digital means.

"The question is the extent to which various tactics and new media enable that confrontation."

Rebecca Wilson has a few favourites among social media campaigns.

One was the response to a new law in Spain making it illegal for people to gather in front of government buildings, including everything from universities to hospitals. A group formed calling itself Holograms for Freedom, which got people to submit photographs online, then turned them into holograms, and then held a holographic protest outside parliament comprising a virtual crowd.

Another was an online scheduling tool established by GetUp!, which enabled its members to serially call crossbench senators to lobby against elements of the Abbott government's budget last year. "So they didn't all call at once, but could call all day, every day, for months."

In a third example, a pro-choice group in the US used an online ratings

"AT THE HEART OF CHANGE IS GETTING STORIES TO PEOPLE, AND TECHNOLOGY HELPS US GET MORE STORIES TO PEOPLE."

site – normally a vehicle for reviewing things such as restaurants or finding tradespeople – to alert women to the fact that local crisis pregnancy centres were actually fronts for pro-life groups.

These examples are all about protest. But there are other examples of more concrete action.

Last week's *Four Corners* program, about the wage exploitation of temporary working visa holders by labour-hire companies supplying workers to Australian primary producers, effectively amounting to slave labour in some cases, relied heavily on case studies provided by the National Union of Workers.

It was made possible by the fact that the NUW has only lately begun organising among farm labourers, and it is doing so substantially online.

It's not easy to organise among backpackers, who often have limited language skills and understanding of their employment rights in this country, and who are churned through the industry.

"They're people who are looking for work online, interacting online, a lot of their life happens there. So we have started organising online, which is the first time I've seen it done," says Emma Kerin, communications officer with the union.

"It's largely down to one Taiwanese organiser, who also worked on a farm. She writes in Mandarin and has her own blog. We're now using a lot of online forums for people to share their stories with us. Then we follow up on them."

The result of the new media organisation and old media exposé is that a number of major producers now are looking at dumping their unethical labour-hire contractors, and hiring directly themselves, with the help of the union.

Another one. Australia's major

electricity suppliers – Origin, AGL, EnergyAustralia – have lobbied the government to cut its target for renewable energy generation. So GetUp! determined it would assist its members and register their dissatisfaction by helping them change providers.

Last year in Victoria, 10,000 did just that, and now GetUp! is rolling out the offer in New South Wales.

"The company we're all switching to is Powershop," says Sam McLean, national director of GetUp!

"It's owned by Meridian Energy, a New Zealand company. They're 100 per cent renewable. Greenpeace rated them the greenest energy provider in Australia."

His organisation's members get cheaper, sustainable power. Powershop gets more customers, and GetUp! gets a little donation for every user who makes the switch. Win, win, win.

"Now we're looking at banks," McLean says. "Commonwealth Bank is looking at funding coal export projects through the Great Barrier Reef. We have about 200,000 members who have accounts with the Commonwealth. How many of them might be prepared to switch their credit cards, savings accounts, home loans, to someone more ethical, like a Bendigo or something like that?"

As Helen Caldicott says, "You effect change by whatever means are at hand."

And as Sam McLean says, you engage people by offering "a low floor and a high ceiling".

That is to say, a hashtag or a petition is a good start, but it must be followed up with engagement towards further action.

"It's like, 'You've already done the easy thing, now let's talk about what hard thing we're going to do together.'" ■