

VOX POPULI

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Between the arch of Septimus Severus and the Temple of Saturn, in a key position on the Roman Forum, stands the remains of the Rostra, the speakers' platform of ancient Rome. The Roman bureaucracy regularly used it to broadcast official announcements, and it was also the site of some of the greatest speeches in history.

The rostra was probably the venue Shakespeare imagined as he penned Mark Antony's plea: 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears' in *Julius Caesar*. And the great statesman, Cicero, during his long career, would undoubtedly have grown to know every column, statue and tufa block of the famous platform.

Mark Antony and Cicero shared many career-enhancing talents - compelling oratory, engaging manners and perhaps most importantly loud, carrying voices. They both worked hard at developing those natural talents to maximise their use on the rostra, the political vehicle of their time. As a result, on several crucial occasions they succeeded in transforming public opinion, thus changing the course of history.

Nowadays, the audience far exceeds the number of Roman citizens who could be contained in the forum, within voice range of the rostra. We require a complex political infrastructure and media to enable our statesmen and stateswomen to communicate with us. Whilst the location of elected members'

offices in their electorates and the encouragement of voters to communicate directly with their MPs are examples of attempts to give citizens a say between polling days – a nod to the principle that in a democracy communication needs to be two-way - true participation is not easy in a modern Western democracy.

Our political processes are slow-moving and cumbersome. We have MPs who have a mere three year tenure and who are more preoccupied with re-election than being visionaries. And it is becoming abundantly clear, as the rate of social change accelerates and the crises that confront us multiply, that we require something very different and new from our elected leaders. For us to have any chance of averting the disasters that confront us, they will have to come up with vision and altruism, at speed. This represents a great challenge for even our most well-meaning politicians.

This is why I think one of the most heartening and inspiring developments of recent years is the burgeoning of online citizens' pressure groups. And just like Mark Antony and Cicero before them, what characterises these groups is their masterful use of the communication apparatus of their era. Using the internet, they regularly circumvent conventional modes of communication and sound the alarm bells, mobilising citizens at short notice to take action on social injustices. And they grow more powerful by the day.

AVAAZ (which means “voice” or “song” in Hindi, Dari and Persian) is one such group. It operates internationally, with the avowed aim of ensuring ‘that the views and values of the world’s people inform global decision-making’. Avaaz is run by campaigners as far apart as London, New York, Paris, Washington, Geneva and Rio de Janeiro, but with their modus operandi being the internet, the

actual geographical distance between them seems not to hamper their team spirit or effectiveness one bit. For them, loud, carrying voices are an irrelevance - though possibly flying fingers are a must.

I first came across Avaaz last year, a year in which the group spearheaded a wide range of campaigns. I don't even recall how I originally came to be on their email list, but I do remember that initially I was only mildly interested. I read the emails and signed the petitions, but beyond that I didn't give them much thought.

It wasn't until late in the year when I experienced their unflagging efforts to keep the world community informed of the terrible events unfolding in Burma that I began to truly appreciate them. In that campaign they were able to collect 750,000 signatures for a petition that was presented to the UN Security Council, amongst others, urging it to 'oppose the violent crackdown on the demonstrators' and 'support genuine reconciliation and democracy'.

Avaaz uses personally-addressed emails to great effect. They inform, exhort and never fail to acknowledge actions taken by members. I greatly appreciated receiving the following email, for example:

'Thank you for raising your voice at the East Asia Summit, and helping Myanmar's people to be heard. By using their leverage, Asian leaders have the power to make the difference between a genuine process of dialogue and transition, or yet more betrayal. By raising our voices together, we could make a real difference.'

By conveying hope in this way, the group encourages people to take action, and of course as soon as you take action, you feel more hopeful. There's nothing quite like feeling what you say matters to dispel despair.

While everyone else was shutting down for Christmas, Avaaz mobilised its resources all over again as the USA, Canada and Japan attempted to wreck the crucial Climate Change Summit in Bali. Instead of sitting, helpless and impotent, watching the developments on TV, over 600,000 Avaaz members signed the largest climate change petition in history, including an incredible 320,000 of them in the last crucial 72 hours.

For that protest, Avaaz did not restrict itself to online activity. It also supported ad campaigns in Bali and Canada, marches around the globe and promoted the phoning and lobbying of elected officials. The group also made its presence felt at the actual Summit, with a march and daily press conferences and 'fossil awards' for the worst countries in the negotiations. Instead of the conference being 'behind closed doors', it was forced into the public domain, where transparency was inevitable. In the final hours, Canada backed down, leaving the US team on their own, booed by the world's diplomats.

Personally, instead of feeling removed from the action and despondent about unfolding events, Avaaz's regular updates made me feel intimately involved and optimistic about the outcome. You can subscribe to Avaaz on avaaz@avaaz.org

I was proud to learn recently that a significant supporter of Avaaz is Australia's own Get Up! (www.getup.org.au). This home-grown group describes itself as a 'politically motivated movement attempting to enlist like-minded people who want to bring participation back into democracy'. And just like Avaaz, although Get Up is a predominantly online organisation, it is increasingly incorporating on-ground activities into its campaigns.

Just this morning I responded to Get Up's invitation to contribute to the 'Peoples' Agenda' for the new Parliament. The group was encouraging all members to prioritize their social concerns on the basis of themes that had emerged from the Vision Get-Togethers that took place on 11 December in the wake of the Federal election. This initiative of Get Up involved people in 130 Federal electorates opening up their homes, often to strangers, to talk through and prioritize the three main issues for the new parliament to consider.

I had my say on the Peoples' Agenda, and even went further, because Get Up has been asked by the new Government to suggest items for the budget. If I was Treasurer, I'd promote alternative forms of energy production like wind and hot rocks and withdraw funding from the nuclear industry. I'd subsidise the purchase of a water tank for every household and promote Peter Andrews, a local water visionary, in the dissemination of his views. I'd also invest heavily in public transport. As you can no doubt tell, I had a great time producing my budget submission.

In its short life, Get Up has had great successes, including these:

- It collected 750,000 signatures about proposed cuts to ABC funding and must take some credit for the budgetary increases of last year.
- The courageous decision by several Liberal back-benchers to cross the floor to express their opposition to the proposed changes to the legislation on refugees was no doubt supported by the 100,000-strong petition of like-minded fellow citizens. The Migration Bill was subsequently withdrawn by Prime Minister Howard.

- As the new Minister for Climate Change and Water, Penny Wong, was boarding her plane for the Bali Summit, local Get Up members handed her a petition with 96,000 signatures.

I believe Get Up represents an exciting new phase in Australian politics. There is the potential for people to have their say and get involved without the necessity to align themselves with a party or single interest group. It gives all of us the chance to think for ourselves and act accordingly. If an issue is presented that holds no interest for you, you simply need not respond.

The huge response to internet campaigns world-wide demonstrates that ordinary citizens are determined to react more speedily and humanely than unwieldy governments are able or inclined to do. What is also obvious is that individuals are often wiser than governments, and when they act together, can achieve great outcomes.

Since I became involved one of the things I have enjoyed most is the feeling of belonging to a cooperative global community – it is one instance where globalisation is not a dirty word. Emails signed ‘from the Get Up team’ or ‘the Avaaz team’ or even ‘Ricken, Milena, Paus, Iain, Sarah, Galit, Pascal and the whole Avaaz Team’ convey several important messages. The first is the sense that I am dealing with real, ordinary people just like me (though perhaps a bit younger). The other is that the organisation is not dependent, as so many conventional political groups are, on charismatic individual figureheads, who may come and go. Longevity and effectiveness are much more likely to occur when there is a group of people working together to effect change, so they can take turns stepping up to the plate.

Something else I appreciate with on-line activism is the speediness of the responses. We can wrestle with issues as they are emerging, rather than factoring in the time delay that we have all become so used to in conventional modes of socio-political communication.

In this sense, the internet is particularly congruent. Online activist groups are predominantly the creation of young minds, for whom the immediacy and accessibility of mobile phones, texting, or voting for your preferences on reality TV shows are second nature. The speed and immediacy of their reactions seems a necessity in a world where change is happening so rapidly and our very existence is threatened. (Though perhaps members from different generations, trained to reflect and take things more slowly, have the potential to provide an interesting balance.)

Of course, no system is perfect, and there are glitches with on-line activism. Involvement that relies so heavily on the internet favours those, predominantly the young, who are most savvy about technology. While I was delighted to hear that the Avaaz video 'Stop the Clash of Civilizations' is the all-time second most-discussed video in the YouTube 'News and Politics' section, I don't actually know how to access YouTube (though of course this may motivate me to learn). Nor do I have the computer skills to create an ad for the Federal election campaign as some Get Up supporters did so brilliantly. And of course there are individuals and communities who have limited or no access at all to the internet.

But even on the Roman rostra there was the occasional glitch. Pliny wrote about a crow that often used to settle there. When the Emperor Tiberius

approached to speak the bird would screech 'Tiberius, Tiberius', much to the annoyance of the Emperor and the amusement of the crowd.

That crow was very lucky to escape Tiberius' wrath. On the pinnacle of Capri stand the remains of the Emperor's palace, with its 'dining room with the drop'. If the infamous host didn't like what you had to say over dinner, he'd simply have you tossed off the balcony into the Mediterranean five hundred metres below. For an Australian, having your say on the internet is nowhere near as dangerous.