

# How change happens

Some reflections and examples from the world of civil society campaigning



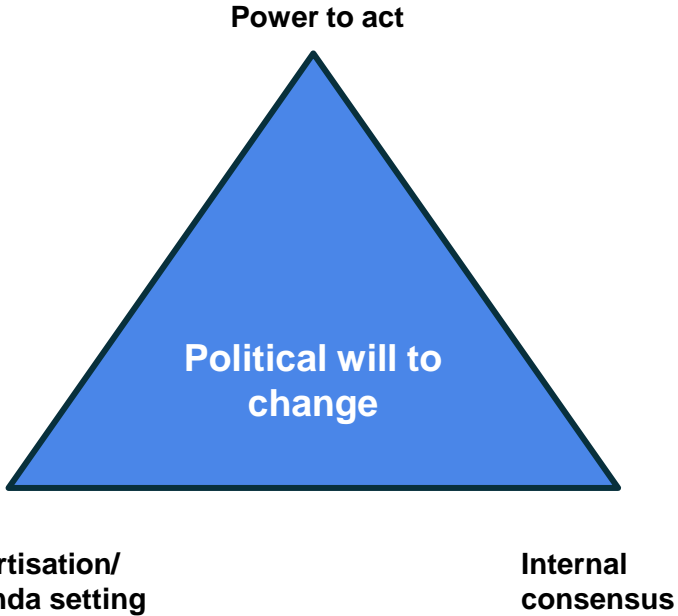
Steve Akehurst, Insight & Messaging Lead, Global Strategic  
Communications Council (GSCC), July 2022

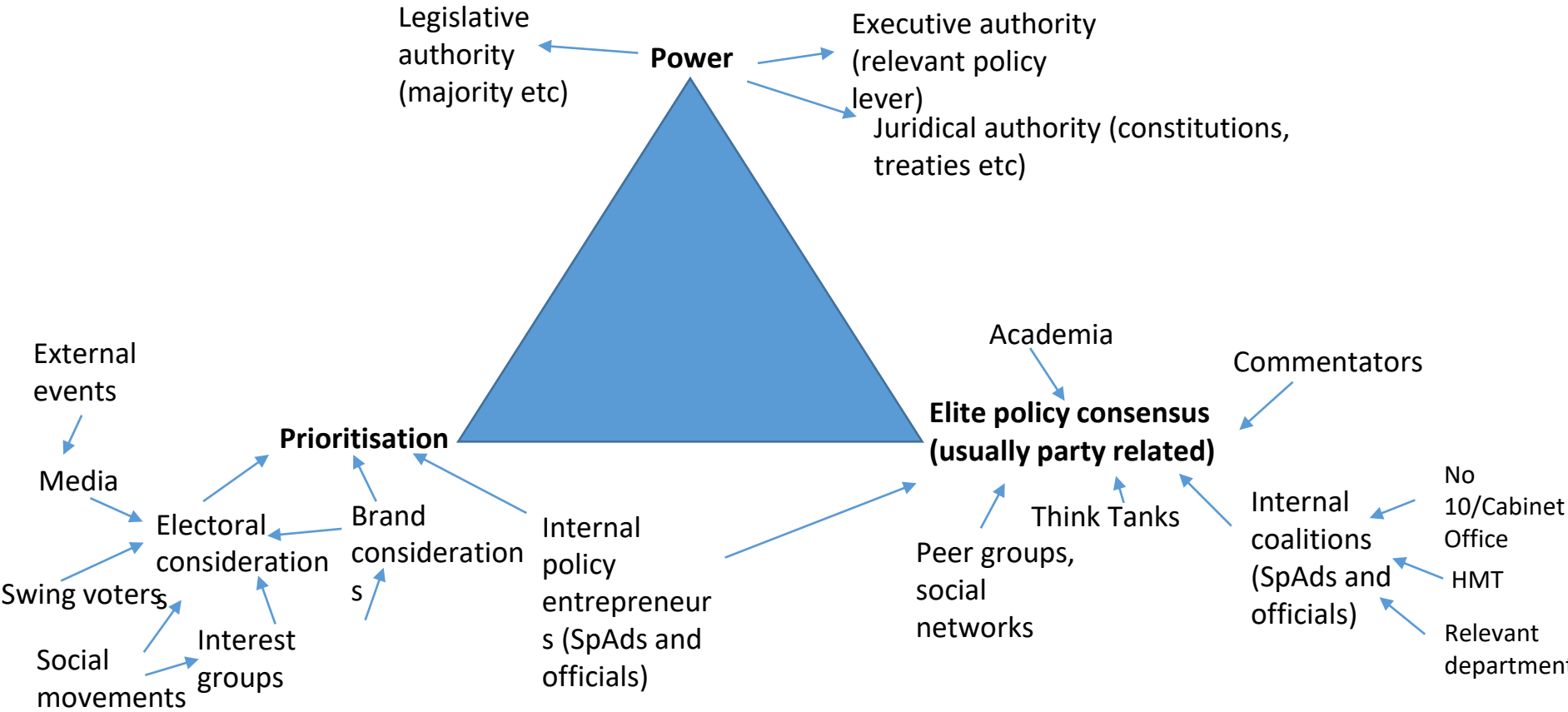
# About me

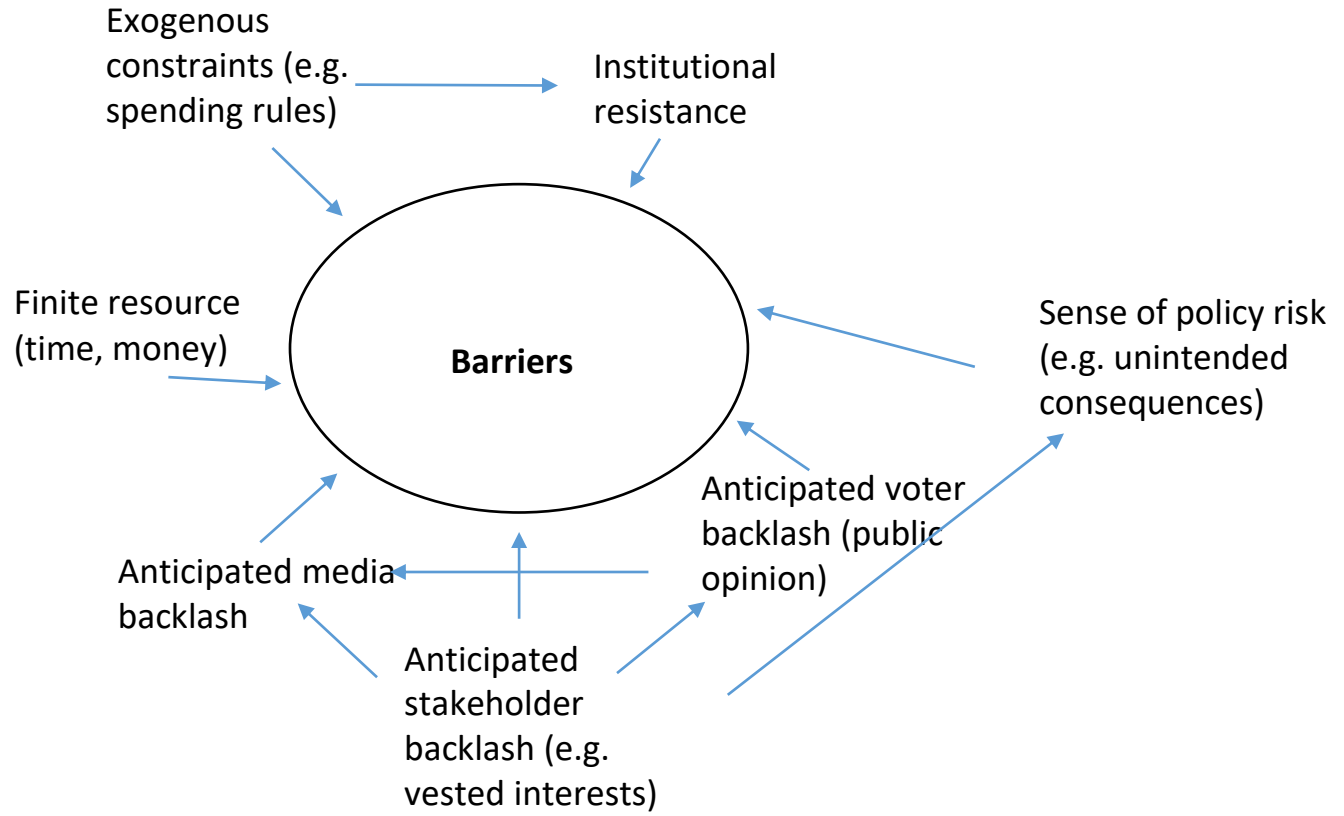
- **A issue campaigner by background who developed an interest in public attitudes and polling.**
  - Insight & Messaging lead at **GSCC**, a global network of communications professionals working to keep climate and clean energy on the top of the agenda around the world (based out of European Climate Foundation).
  - Before that, **civil servant** working on DFID/FCO funded projects working on campaigns/communications with governments in the Western Balkans.
  - Before that...7 years at **Shelter** as Head of Public Affairs, stint as Head of PA & Campaigns. These are my most formative years!
- @SteveAkehurst on Twitter

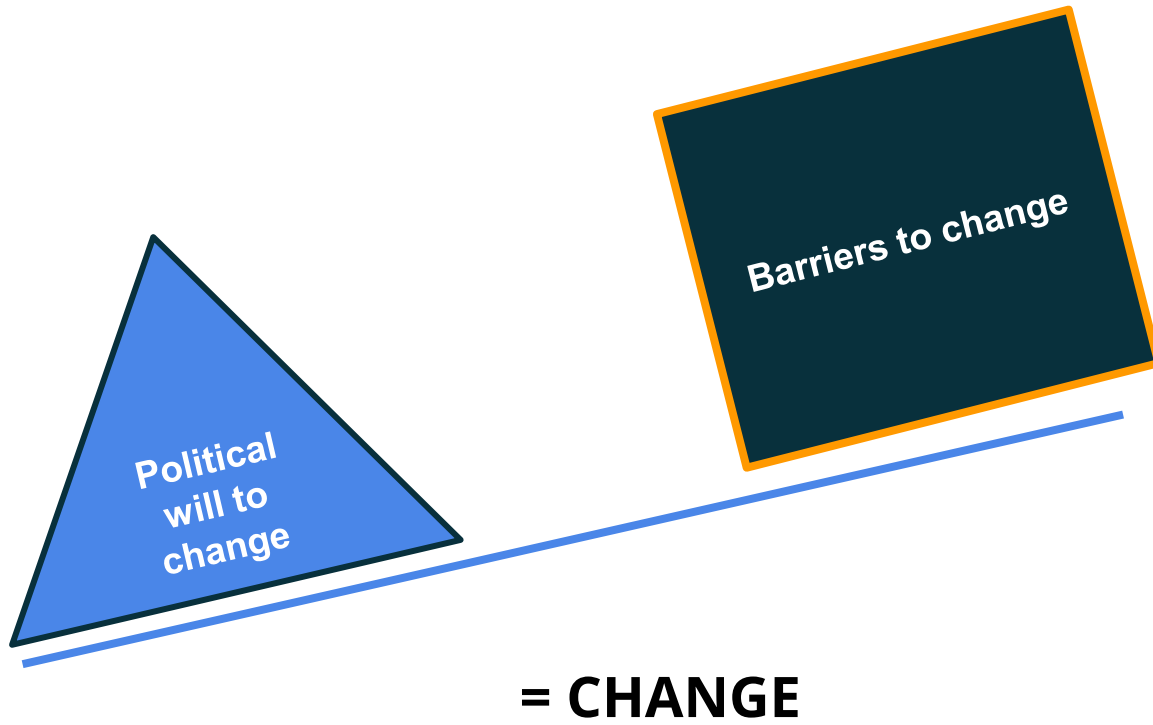
***“What are the best examples of civil society shifting the narrative on an issue? What strategies and insights add the greatest value? What is the best way of operationalising a common effort? How did this help achieve tangible change?”***



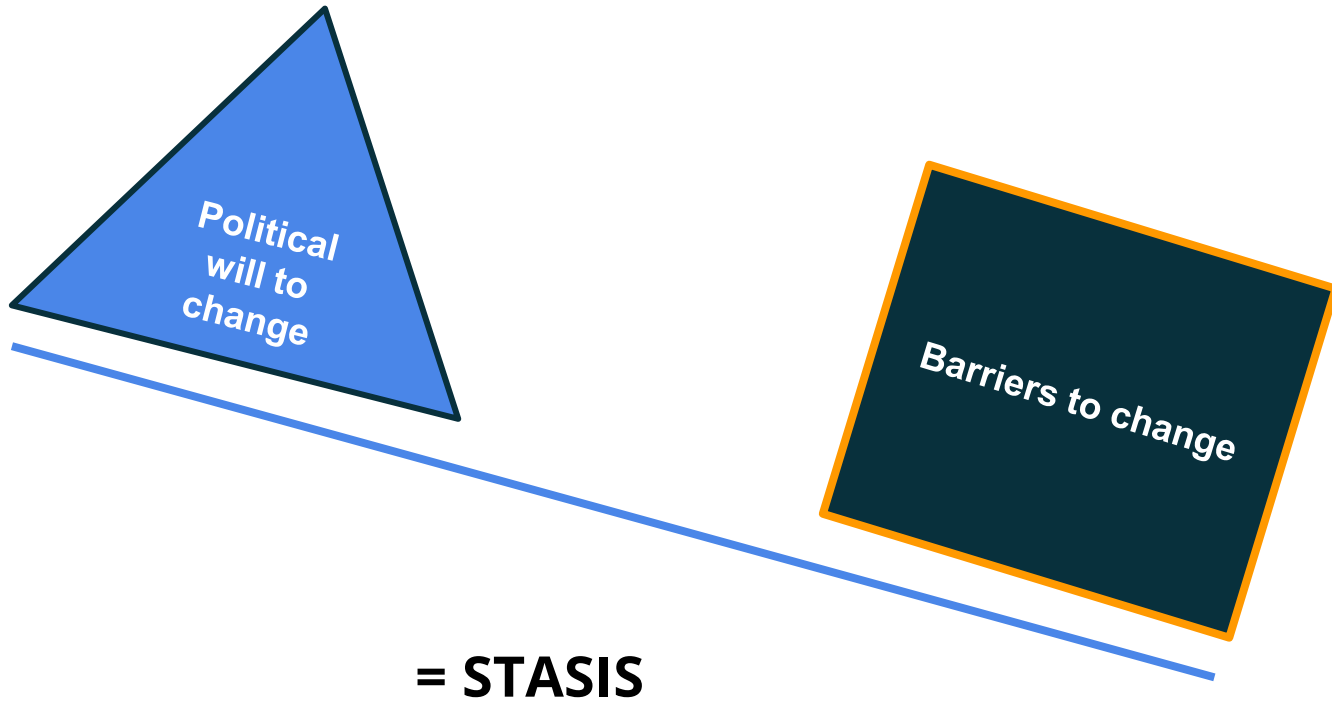












The amount of political will you need depends on your barriers to change (the size of your task, the number of vested interests it upsets, how much it costs, etc)...

- **Your first task is to understand (I mean really understand) your barriers to change**
- No really, if your ask is so damn smart, why hasn't it happened yet?

Ok, but why? Why? Keep going...

This is not a science! Your answers to this inherently shape your strategy, and the quality of the intel/assumptions you use to reach these answers will be the life or death of your campaign

Issues have brands too, as do advocates - find out what yours is among your primary audience

Most campaign strategies are some combination of telling a story that...

- Increases perceptions of the opportunity of action/risk of inaction
- Decreases perceptions of barriers to action

**For most issue campaigns, especially long standing ones, changing the political environment involves changing WHO is speaking or WHO IS BEING SPOKEN ABOUT and WHERE (towards those who have more political power)**

**Some examples...**

# Shelter

**Problem:** significant cuts to affordable housing budget in 2010; need for many more affordable homes to lessen the housing/homelessness crisis

**Major barrier:** housing seen as a core vote Labour issue

**Strategy:** increase the salience of housing by increasing concern amongst C1/C2 swing voters (about their children's future)

**Result:** affordable housing budget increased while every other budget was cut; S106 reform; borrowing cap on councils lifted; PRS reform

**Why did it (mostly) work?** Framed the problem around voters/issues Cameron/Osborne cared more about, reported in the newspapers and elite circles they cared about.



## International aid sector (Save the Children, MPH, Bond etc)

**Problem:** lack of long-term cross-party buy-in to an independent aid budget  
Major barrier: high cost for little electoral reward?

**Strategy:** position aid as a re-branding opportunity; cultivate key advocates and groups inside the Conservative tent around Private Members Bill; big use of big name messengers to make it stick

**Result:** 0.7% GDP pledge, held from 2010 until this year



**Why did it work?** Aligned perfectly with the 'liberal Conservatism' project of Cameron; Make Poverty History was the year he became leader. Mobilised many small-c conservative groups (eg churches).

# WE BELONG

— YOUNG MIGRANTS STANDING UP —

**Problem:** 300,000+ young people of insecure immigration status - grown up in Britain but faced barriers to Higher Ed and lengthy/expensive paths to citizenship

**Major barrier:** 'hostile environment' to immigration, political incentives to punish and deter migration; negative perceptions of migrants on the right

**Strategy:** Mobilising an aspirational group of young people who have 'done the right thing' but are still being hit; 'Let Us Learn', 'British In All But Paperwork'; framing positions them as a opportunity and a risk for Govt (esp after Windrush). Some use of strategic litigation by partners.

**Result:** route to IDLR/citizenship halved to 5 years from 10, costs reduced; young UK migrants given guaranteed right to higher education in the UK



**Why did it work?** In their own words: unashamedly small/incrementalist asks; unashamedly Conservative-friendly framing and relationship building; platforming (sympathetic) advocates and case studies; insider approach with help of outsiders



# KWAJO- Social Housing

@KwajoHousing

**Problem:** poor social housing conditions in parts of the Housing Association sector

**Major barrier:** very little tenant power/leverage over their landlords

**Strategy:** shame providers on social media through exposes, use of videos and general large platform

**Result:** significant improvements by HAs; many highlighted families moved to better homes



**Why did it work?** Picked a target that was easier to shame than Govt; HAs especially susceptible to pressure on social media from progressives

1. Have a clear sense of what you want and who has the power to deliver it
2. Understand your barriers to change - how big is your task? who or what influences your primary audience?
3. Frame the problem loudly, consistently and in terms that speak to or worry your primary audience
4. Bring in/organise/mobilise/co-ordinate or speak to unusual voices - ones with power that are going to worry or influence your audience
5. Be disciplined! (to your strategy, about your role in change vs others)

“...and I always tell my staff, **“Better is good.”** I’ll take better every time, **because better is hard.** Better may not be as good as the best, but better is surprisingly hard to obtain. And **better is actually harder than worse!”**

~ President Obama, 2016

**Are we being as ruthless as possible** in our understanding of the barriers to change and of our own power to create threat or opportunity, as things stand? Or we are deluding ourselves?

# Thanks!

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