

# ENABLING EMERGENCE: THE BENTLEY BLOCKADE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A GASFIELD FREE NORTHERN RIVERS

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*The stories told of the Franklin, of Jabiluka,  
they're going to be told of Bentley  
and the reason those stories are told  
is that we really need to know how you did it.*

Senator Scott Ludlam  
Bentley Blockade, May 18, 2014<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Daley, "B Day At Bentley – A Political Solution, or a Democratic Hand Grenade?" *Mick Daley weblog* 27 May, 2014, <http://www.mickdaley.com/b-day-at-bentley-a-political-solution-or-a-democratic-hand-grenade/>

The Bentley Blockade was a rare occasion in Australian history when an entire region stood up to government and corporations and held the line. The confrontation took place near Lismore in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. It was a turning point in the growing national movement against coal and gas industry expansion in Australia, but what made Bentley unique was the extent to which it mobilised community support across the region. Farmers, Indigenous people, townsfolk, environmentalists, professionals and businesspeople united in a vision of a Gasfield Free region and thousands committed to a path of nonviolent direct action (NVDA) to help achieve it.<sup>2</sup> The Northern Rivers campaign, like the overarching Lock The Gate community movement around Australia, achieved a unity of purpose based on values shared by diverse participants.<sup>3</sup>

The blockade was a culmination of several years of movement building. The headline events in the Gasfield Free campaign are well documented in media reports from that period, but what remains elusive, and is best understood from an insider's perspective, is how the emerging social movement<sup>4</sup> was organised.

The most visible organising entity for the movement was Gasfield Free Northern Rivers (GFNR), an alliance of numerous autonomous, collaborating action groups from throughout the region. GFNR was an unincorporated entity with no constitution, no formal membership, and no formal office bearers. Nevertheless, GFNR supported the emergence of a very large, complex and adaptable regional social movement, in concert with a tightly focused political campaign. Although loosely organised, GFNR achieved coherence through fluid performative leadership and constantly evolving structural constraints.

This article explores the movement-building and blockade phases of the emergence of GFNR, with specific reference to the use of principles derived

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2 Hamish Broome, 'How the CSG War Was Won' *Northern Star Online* 17 March, 2013. <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/broad-church-brought-industry-to-standstill/1794550/#/0>

3 Rebecca Colvin et al, 'Strange Bedfellows or an Alignment of Values? Exploration of Stakeholder Values in an Alliance of Concerned Citizens Against Coal Seam Gas Mining' (2015) 42 *Land Use Policy* 392.

4 'A social movement can be understood as a cultural phenomenon that organizes around particular values and can include within it a complex network of organisations in the formal sense and numerous individuals and community groups committed to action in relation to shared values.' Bill Moyer, JoAnn MacAllister, and Mary Lou Finley Steven Soifer. *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (New Society Publishers, 2001).

from complexity theory and from David Snowden's related Cynefin framework.<sup>5</sup> The Cynefin framework has been applied in management contexts<sup>6</sup>, in health settings<sup>7</sup> and in health promotion and collaborations.<sup>8</sup> Through practitioner action learning, the framework is continuously developed by David Snowden and colleagues in Cognitive Edge.<sup>9</sup> To the best of the authors' knowledge, it has not previously been used to understand a social movement. For the social movement, the Cynefin framework provided an experimental rather than an ideologically driven frame for the GFNR's choices about structure and leadership. The article tells the story of the emergence of the movement through reflection and contemporaneous sources, but also refers to some relevant academic literature in relation to social movement organisation and complexity theory.

The research is predominantly primary research based upon three main sources of data. These include; first, the authors' own observations and analysis as fully immersed ('emic') participants within the social movement, second, semi-structured interviews conducted with other relevant participants (activists and police), and third, the collection of published and unpublished data. The latter includes contemporaneous media reports and commentary; government or industry publications; internal GFNR documents; and government communications obtained through formal information access requests.

The emic participant approach is well suited to the study of social movements because deeply embedded researchers, as insiders, are best placed to understand the complex interactions taking place.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly so where the social movement is engaged in civil disobedience and is challenging powerful vested interests, and trust, for externally situated researchers is very difficult to

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5 David Snowden, "The Cynefin Framework" *Cognitive Edge*, YouTube video, published July 11, 2010 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=77&v=N7oz366X0-8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=77&v=N7oz366X0-8)

6 David Snowden & Mary Boone, 'A Leader's Framework for Decision Making', (2007) 85(11) *Harvard Business Review* 68.

7 Stephen L Stathis and Viv Read, 'Moving Beyond RCT Evidence: Complexity Frameworks in Psychiatric Leadership and Research' (2018) *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* DOI: 10.1177/0004867418818751; Liz Fulop & Annabelle Mark, 'Relational Leadership. Decision-Making and the Messiness of Context in Healthcare', (2013) 9(2) *Leadership* 254.

8 Eric van Beurden et al, 'Making Sense in a Complex Landscape: How the Cynefin Framework from Complex Adaptive Systems Theory can Inform Health Promotion Practice', (2011) 28(1) *Health Promotion International* 73.

9 Cognitive Edge website: <https://cognitive-edge.com/about-us/> The iterative development of the Cynefin framework can be seen in David Snowden's blogs, for example Cynefin Dynamics (2015) <http://cognitive-edge.com/blog/cynefin-dynamics/>

10 Allan Kellehear, *The Unobtrusive Researcher: A Guide to Methods* (Allen & Unwin, 1993), 16-28

establish. The authors personally played significant educational and leadership roles within GFNR.

The Bentley Blockade has been described by the local Police Commander, Superintendent Greg Martin as '[t]he biggest public order exercise ever encountered by the NSW police force in its history.'<sup>11</sup> It was a well-equipped physical blockade, supported by a large and fluid campsite and backed by a regional support network of five to ten thousand people<sup>12</sup>. A briefing paper from Assistant Police Commissioner Jeff Loy, to the NSW state government, about the blockade, reported on the growing support the blockade enjoyed from the surrounding population; the sophisticated nature of the physical blockade, including the use of buried structures for locking in protesters, and the capacity to mobilise many thousands of people from neighboring towns and districts at short notice.<sup>13</sup> Echoing the observations of Superintendent Martin, Assistant Commissioner Loy described the situation as 'an unprecedented public order challenge.'<sup>14</sup> The Bentley Blockade was the third in a series of blockades in the Northern Rivers against exploratory drilling by the resources company Metgasco.<sup>15</sup> The NSW government responded to the size of the Bentley Blockade with a planned police operation involving more than 800 police, code-named 'Operation Stapler.'<sup>16</sup> On 15th May 2014, the NSW government changed course and suspended Operation Stapler, as well as the company's drilling operation at Bentley.<sup>17</sup>

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11 Superintendent Greg Martin, Commander, Richmond Local Police Command, pers com 2018.

12 Aidan Ricketts, 'Anti-Protest Laws: Lock Up Your Nannas' (2017) 42 *Alternative Law Journal* 107-109.

13 Jeff Loy (Assistant Commissioner, Northern Region), Internal Briefing on Operation Stapler to Minister of Police and Emergency Services NSW, (5 May 2014) DOC011920; Minister of Police and Emergency Services NSW Internal briefing to NSW Office of Premier and Cabinet (9 May 2014) DOC011934.

14 Ibid

15 'Timeline: The Rise And Fall of Metgasco', *Northern Star Online*, January 22, 2016. <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/the-rise-and-fall-of-metgasco/2906610/>

16 Steve Laska, (Inspector Northern Region), Untitled Briefing Paper (27 March 2014), DOC 011604 Minister of Police and Emergency Services; NSW Internal briefing to NSW Office of Premier and Cabinet, (9 May 2014) DOC011934.

17 Anthony Roberts MP, 'Metgasco Drilling Approval Suspended', News Release, May 15, 2014. <https://www.anthonyrobertsmp.com.au/media/media-releases/metgasco-drilling-approval-suspended>

## Beginnings and maturation of a movement

The Bentley Blockade was the culmination of a mobilising effort spanning several years. From 2010, opposition to gasfield development emerged in the Northern Rivers as a response to increasingly visible field activity by petroleum exploration companies and to stories emerging from communities in southeast Queensland where the unconventional gas industry had become established. Nationally, the Lock the Gate movement was raising awareness through its campaign against unconventional gas mining and new coal mines, and a global anti-fracking movement was emerging.<sup>18</sup>

By 2010, gas exploration licences covered most of the Northern Rivers,<sup>19</sup> and several local action groups<sup>20</sup> had formed as communities began to self-organise in response to the perceived threat. Boudicca Cerese who was active in the campaign prior to the emergence of GFNR, describes the early emergence of self-organised action.

The underlying condition was of small disparate groups beginning to raise awareness, new groups popping up, and more individuals getting involved. Much of the impetus came from visible activity by gas companies in people's communities. It was a swirling mass but as we began to sew it together regionally, people would meet and begin to coalesce.<sup>21</sup>

In late 2011, a group of about ten experienced social movement activists met with the explicit aim of scaling up local resistance into a regional mass movement. From the outset, the group, identified within GFNR as 'Capacity Builders' focused upon enabling rather than directing the emergence of region-wide resistance. This focus reflected the group's experience in social movement

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18 Jonathan Wood, "The Global Anti-Fracking Movement: What it Wants; How it Operates and What's Next", *Control Risks*, 2012, 1. [https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:zg7azQrBeuQJ:www.controlrisks.com/Oversized%2520assets/shale\\_gas\\_whitepaper.pdf+&hl=en&gl=au&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESiOe2IHg-PxPGhDepndcA4V7AziCgRdeCq9MFJTsVb1\\_WZgpw6iu9oq92zZfEaKh-k2WbqdjKiueSofXgCld8zmc4N1mC1Cr0lwrRLkht1DcpyoVcJltwnzijLG0shmEiost5Ft&sig=AHIEtbRMMwFPeI02BQIP0AiB2YZIY3C0pw](https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:zg7azQrBeuQJ:www.controlrisks.com/Oversized%2520assets/shale_gas_whitepaper.pdf+&hl=en&gl=au&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESiOe2IHg-PxPGhDepndcA4V7AziCgRdeCq9MFJTsVb1_WZgpw6iu9oq92zZfEaKh-k2WbqdjKiueSofXgCld8zmc4N1mC1Cr0lwrRLkht1DcpyoVcJltwnzijLG0shmEiost5Ft&sig=AHIEtbRMMwFPeI02BQIP0AiB2YZIY3C0pw)

19 Rudi Maxwell and Andy Parks, 'CSG Concerns Bubble to Surface', *Lismore Echo*, March 3, 2011, <https://www.echonews.com.au/news/csg-concerns-bubble-to-surface-locals-csg-concerns/784953/>

20 These included the Kyogle Group Against Gas, Keerrong Gas Squad, and Northern Rivers Guardians

21 Boudicca Ceres, pers. com. 2015

work, and for some, a growing familiarity with concepts derived from complexity theory that will be discussed subsequently.

Boudicca Ceres described the impacts following the earliest Capacity-Builders meetings as follows.

After Capacity-Builders there were more experienced campaigners and organisers in the field and there was a training program, whilst the various streams of the campaign, like information and organising, were being drawn together. It was like tributaries flowing in to create a more powerful flow, including information about industry activities and government processes, media, mobilisation, NVDA and social movement training and the naming of a regional alliance group GFNR.<sup>22</sup>

## A powerful grass-roots movement

From early 2012, the movement expanded rapidly through a series of key initiatives. One of these was a process called ‘Gasfield Free Communities’. Started as a pilot in one locality, this process went viral as more and more communities conducted house-to-house surveys that revealed overwhelming support for remaining Gasfield Free. To the survey question, ‘*Do you want your district Gasfield Free?*’, 94.9% of respondents answered ‘Yes’.<sup>23</sup> Communities held ceremonies to declare themselves Gasfield Free and asserted this status via signs on district roads. This was not a top-down community organising model, rather, local communities were assisted to conduct their own meetings and processes. It morphed into a form of civil defence networking, based upon the frames of local democracy<sup>24</sup> and mutual aid.

By visiting every house, this process engaged people of a wide political affiliation, setting off ‘network cascades’ as coal seam gas became the focus of conversation. The network of communities developed rapidly and by April 2014 there were 136 Gasfield Free communities. Bentley was one of them.

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22 Boudicca Ceres, pers com. 2015

23 Gasfield Free Communities involved some coordination and ‘minimal constraints’, foremost amongst which was strong encouragement for rigour in visiting every house, and collection of data. The data were compiled by GFNR, so that media and other communications would accurately reflect what communities were doing. The data is held by GFNR.

24 Giorel Curran, ‘Social Licence, Corporate Social Responsibility and Coal Seam Gas: Framing the New Political Dynamics of Contestation’, (2017) 101 *Energy Policy* 427.

But even after the Bentley Blockade, these numbers continued to grow until 2015, when the NSW government finally bought back all gas licenses that had covered the region.<sup>25</sup> By the successful end of the campaign there were 147 Gasfield Free Communities, and a total of 33,670 survey respondents.

In September 2012, the Lismore City Council conducted a poll overseen by the NSW Electoral Commission that recorded a resounding vote of 87% of the Lismore Local Government Area opposed to the gas industry.<sup>26</sup> Analysis of voting figures revealed a strong correlation between survey figures from Gasfield Free community surveys and polling results in equivalent rural localities.

Within days of the poll results being announced, the NSW government issued a production licence<sup>27</sup> to Metgasco and also renewed Metgasco's exploration licences.<sup>28</sup> GFNR framed the government's response as a crisis of democracy, in which the 87% was now pitted against the combined might of government and an invasive gasfields industry.<sup>29</sup> The dual framing of the failure of existing political institutions and of an invasive threat from outside the region provided a powerful argument for a resort to nonviolent direct action as the last remaining option for the community.<sup>30</sup>

## Learning and training

One of the slogans of the GFNR campaign was 'Non-violent; Non-negotiable'. This phrase captures the widespread sentiment that from 2012, intensification

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25 Melissa Gulbin, 'Victory For People Power: CSG Offer Celebrated' *Northern Star Online*, November 3, 2015 <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/csg-25m-offer-a-victory-for-people-power/2827622/>

26 Hanabeth Luke et al, 'Developing the Lismore CSG Poll – A University/Local Government Collaboration' (2013) 15(3) *Journal of Economic and Social Policy* XX; Australian Broadcasting Corporation, '2012 NSW Local Council Elections: Lismore City Council' (September 2012). <http://www.abc.net.au/elections/nsw/2012/council/?page=Lismore>

27 Samantha Turnbull & Justine Frazier, 'Coal Seam Gas Production Approved' *ABC North Coast NSW*, September, 12, 2012: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2012/09/12/3588570.htm>

28 Kim Honan, 'CSG Opponents Angry as NSW Government Renews Exploration Licences', *ABC News Online* September 12,, 2012: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2012-09-12/csg-opponents-angry-as-nsw-government-renews/6118994>

29 The democracy frame used in the GFNR campaign has been so described by 24.

30 Aidan Ricketts, 'Conflict Inevitable as Gas Mining is Forced Upon Unwilling Communities', *Aidan Ricketts Activist weblog*, November 6, 2012. <http://aidanricketts.com/conflict-inevitable-as-gas-mining-is-forced-upon-unwilling-communities/>

of conflict was inevitable. Increasingly, communities committed to mutual aid, and requested training in nonviolent direct action. Training across the region<sup>31</sup> built a critical mass of people who understood social movement dynamics; the basics of nonviolent action; and civil disobedience as a form of direct democracy. This critical mass was essential to the success and peacefulness of the community blockades that took place in the two years before Bentley.

During 2013, exploration drilling was resisted by community blockades first at Glenugie near Grafton<sup>32</sup> and later at Doubtful Creek near Kyogle<sup>33</sup> and police were deployed in order to enable the installation of drill rigs and to provide ongoing security for gas company operations. Whilst those early blockades failed to prevent the drilling, supporters maintained a disruptive presence for the entire operation. As the social movement built momentum, setbacks were internally framed as part of a longer process that would eventually bring government and corporations to account.<sup>34</sup> GFNR maintained morale by insisting that a business model that relied upon 24 hour policing for its entire operation was bound to fail,<sup>35</sup> and also by turning some of the campaign focus onto the business model, reputation and plunging share price of Metgasco.<sup>36</sup>

A 2012 international report prepared for the unconventional gas industries by an industry risk consultancy group observed how problematic blockades had become for industry and specifically noted the situation in NSW.

Blockades are a favoured non-violent direct action tactic across the environmental activist movement, particularly for rural gas drilling projects...while the costs to activists of blockades are extremely low – both in terms of organisation and penalties – the potential for disruption to the target can be significant in

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31 Aidan Ricketts, 'CSG Free Northern Rivers Training Workshop', *Aidan Ricketts Activist weblog*, March 6, 2012. <http://aidanricketts.com/march-11-2012-csg-free-northern-rivers-training-workshop/>

32 Domonic Feain, 'Glenugie Blockade: 18 Arrested, 25 Charges Laid', *Northern Star Online*, January 7, 2013. <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/glenugie-blockade-18-arrested-25-charges-laid/1708714/>

33 Hamish Broome, 'Huge Police Presence Gets Trucks Through', *Northern Star Online*, February 8, 2013. <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/huge-police-presence-gets-trucks-through/1747956/>

34 Aidan Ricketts, 'The Good Fight Against Coal Seam Gas', *New Matilda*, February 27, 2013: <https://newmatilda.com/2013/02/27/good-fight-against-coal-seam-gas/>

35 Aidan Ricketts, 'Democracy vs Corporate Survival', *Aidan Ricketts Activist weblog*, January 16, 2014. <http://aidanricketts.com/democracy-vs-corporate-survival/>

36 Aidan Ricketts, 'Investment Risk: An Amplification Tool for Social Movement Campaigns Globally and Locally', (2013) 15(3) *Journal of Economic and Social Policy* XXX



terms of lost productivity and extra operating costs. The Lock the Gate movement... has targeted a range of operators and service companies in both Queensland and New South Wales.<sup>37</sup>

## Switching on the towns of Lismore and Casino

While the movement grew quickly in rural areas directly threatened by exploration licences, action groups within the regional alliance experimented with ways to engage the towns of Casino and Lismore. Metgasco had made Casino their base, establishing a network of influence in this town of 11,000 people. Local action groups responded by leafleting houses, door-knocking, distributing campaign information on DVD, and conducting surveys of shop-owners in the main streets.

The regional city of Lismore was larger with 27,000 people in the urban area. In March 2012 a public meeting was called, following a letterbox drop. A surprising 700 people showed up.<sup>38</sup> In a follow up meeting a week later, facilitators assisted the large group to generate a number of specific project-based working groups.

We didn't try to form a new organisation, give it a name, a structure, elect office bearers, or even a committee. Our thinking was that formal structure can take enormous energy out of an organisation. We decided to move straight to action groups with a pragmatic purpose and function.<sup>39</sup>

One of the project groups committed to organising a public rally that attracted 7,000 participants on 14 May 2012.<sup>40</sup> In a Local Government Area (LGA) of 49,000 people, this represents one seventh of the size of the Lismore LGA's permanent population, although of course participants were drawn from a region-wide catchment.<sup>41</sup> Another project group staged *CSG, The Musical*,

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37 Wood, 'The Global Anti-Fracking Movement', 10.

38 'Public Meets to Slam CSG Mining', *Daily Examiner Online*, March 5, 2012. <https://www.dailyexaminer.com.au/news/public-meets-to-slam-csg-mining-jenny-dowell/1293344/>

39 Simon Clough, pers com. 2015

40 Paul Attewell, 'Community Unites Against CSG', *Northern Star Online*, May 14, 2012. <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/community-unites-against-csg/1378789/>

41 By a simple comparison, one seventh of Lismore's normal population would in the case of Australia's largest city Sydney with a population of 4.3 million equate to 600,000 people marching. Obviously there are major variables that make this comparison unreliable, but it is intended to give a sense of proportion only.

which raised \$20,000 for the campaign.<sup>42</sup> One working group became an ‘action learning laboratory’ for Gasfield Free Communities, reflecting on each iteration to better understand what helped, and what hindered this process of grass-roots democracy.

GFNR developed its online capacity from 2012 onwards principally through hosting its own website,<sup>43</sup> YouTube channel,<sup>44</sup> Facebook and Twitter accounts. The website gave GFNR a locus for collecting stories, media and photos and for disseminating information including training guides for nonviolent direct action<sup>45</sup> and for the process for forming Gasfield Free communities.<sup>46</sup> The plethora of autonomous action groups that had emerged as part of the wider regional movement also generated a network of Facebook pages that shared information and posts across the movement.<sup>47</sup>

With its extensive person-to-person engagement, social media activity and distributed leadership, the movement expanded through several significant phase transitions, increasing its impact and scale. One of these scaling-up transitions was evident during 2012. The large public rallies of this year (4,000 in Murwillumbah, 7,000 in Lismore) were more than temporary peak events; they were surface manifestations of growing collective agency.<sup>48</sup> With so many interacting agents, the system continued to transform and develop new emergent capabilities.

Another dramatic phase transition occurred in 2014 as the Bentley blockade approached. A police briefing to the NSW government attested to the scale and complexity of the regional movement.

Intelligence indicates that the Northern Rivers area has a high rate of support for the anti-coal seam gas exploration movement.

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42 S Sorrensen, ‘Mining Their Talent’ *Lismore Echo*, June 14, 2012: <https://www.echonews.com.au/news/mining-their-talent-mining-musical-talent/1415934/>

43 Gasfield Free Northern Rivers website: <http://csgfreenorthernrivers.org/>

44 Gasfield Free Northern Rivers YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/csgfreenr/videos>

45 GFNR/Nonviolent direct action: <http://csgfreenorthernrivers.org/non-violent-direct-action/>

46 GFNR/Gasfield Free Communities: <http://csgfreenorthernrivers.org/csg-free-communities/>

47 The use of social media in another CSG dispute in NSW is examined in Carolyn Hendriks et al, ‘Performing Politics on Social Media: The Dramaturgy of an Environmental Controversy on Facebook’ (2016) 25(6) *Environmental Politics* 1.

48 ‘Thousands Rally Against CSG’, *ABC News Online*, May 15, 2012. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-05-14/lism-rally/4009970>

Numerous alliances have been set up to provide a coordinated protest to the operations of Metgasco. These groups include Lock the Gate; Gasfield-free Northern Rivers; Northern Rivers Guardians; Front Line Against Gas group; the Channon Gas Defence Network; Rock Valley Gas Rangers; and Keerong Gas Squad. Information indicates that these groups are well supported through membership and financial community donations.<sup>49</sup>

As the police did their best to assess the strength of the movement, it grew under their eyes. By May, resistance had become so normalised that various businesses and institutions refused material support to Metgasco and/or the police operation,<sup>50</sup> a sign that remaining pillars of support for the industry were falling.

A briefing from an Assistant Commissioner of Police to the NSW government issued on 5 May 2014 gives an insight into how police perceived the support enjoyed by the movement.

The community groundswell of support is strong and becoming stronger every day. This extends to open support for protesters through the Local Government Area mayors (Lismore, Tweed, Kyogle)... The camp has approximately 1000 permanent residents, with 100-200 visitors per day.<sup>51</sup>

Undoubtedly, many factors contributed to the scale and complexity of the social movement that emerged in the lead up to the Bentley blockade, including the ubiquitous nature of the exploration licences covering private tenure; the nested nature of the regional, national and global movements; and the Northern Rivers' own history of successful activism. These factors however would still not account for the scale, resourcefulness and complexity of the movement that emerged. Despite its history of environmental activism, previous campaigns in

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49 Laska, Untitled Briefing Paper 2014, DOC 011604; Minister of Police and Emergency Services; NSW Internal briefing to NSW Office of Premier and Cabinet, (9 May 2014) DOC011934

50 'Fencing Companies Take a Stand, Reject Metgasco Contracts', *Northern Star Online*, April 10, 2014. <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/fencing-companies-take-stand-reject-metgasco-contr/2225600/> 'Firey Protest at Bentley RFS Station', *Echo Daily*, April 2, 2014. <https://www.echo.net.au/2014/04/firey-protest-bentley-rfs-station/>; 'Lismore Mayor Says Southern Cross University has Backflipped on Bentley Police Catering', *ABC News Online*, May 9 2014. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-09/bentley-catering/5442902>

51 Assistant Commissioner Jeff Loy (Northern Region), 'Internal briefing on Operation Stapler to Minister of Police and Emergency Services NSW', 5 May 2014 Obtained under information access legislation, DOC 11920.

the Northern Rivers had not enjoyed the widespread mainstream support that emerged leading up to Bentley.<sup>52</sup> The phase transitions that saw the movement shift from minority to majority, and that enjoyed the open support of local businesses and the willingness of thousands of people to consider personal engagement in direct action protest for the first time in their lives<sup>53</sup> attest to a movement that had become transformative in its engagement with the local population.

The Capacity Builders group intentionally fostered the growth and fitness of the movement rather than to attempt to centrally direct it. The result was a diverse movement in which local autonomy was maximised, leadership was performative and functional rather than structural, and innovation and initiative on the part of the growing range of participants was encouraged.

Whilst GFNR certainly reflected the instinctively democratic culture that is common within ‘eco-pax’ protest movements in Australia,<sup>54</sup> it went further, being informed by the application of complexity frameworks to make sense of, and enable region-wide resistance to go to scale. The use of complexity principles and the Cynefin framework to inform GFNR’s movement building capabilities is discussed below.<sup>55</sup>

## Organising for emergence: Complexity theory and the Cynefin framework

Choices about organisational and leadership styles are often perceived by social movement organisation (SMO) participants as a choice between ideology and pragmatism. Loosely organised structures are often portrayed as more democratic, whilst more tightly structured forms of organising are often

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52 Previous campaigns such as Terania Creek protests and the North East Forest Alliance had maintained a counter cultural profile see Marty Branagan, *Global Warming, Militarism and Nonviolence: The art of active resistance*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) Ch 3.

53 ‘We Were There: Covering the Bentley Blockade’, *Northern Star Online*, 17 October, 2015. <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/we-were-there-covering-bentley-blockade/2809535/>

54 Marty Branagan, *Global Warming, Militarism and Nonviolence: The art of active resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 75.

55 David Snowden, ‘The Cynefin Framework’, *Cognitive Edge*, YouTube video published July 11, 2010. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=77&v=N7oz366X0-8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=77&v=N7oz366X0-8)

perceived to be more pragmatic.<sup>56</sup> Ideologically, many SMOs eschew formal organisation<sup>57</sup> or openly resist hierarchy and formal leadership.<sup>58</sup>

There is broad acknowledgement in social movement literature that both bureaucratic and structure-less forms of organisation<sup>59</sup> at their extreme polarities tend to stifle creative leadership but that innovative leadership can and often does emerge from participatory decision making structures.<sup>60</sup> Further, there is a growing recognition that effective participatory structures are strongly context dependent. Different forms suit different movements at different stages of movement emergence.<sup>61</sup> Hanisch, for example, strongly suggests that whilst loose decentralised groups can progress consciousness-raising well in the early stages of movement development,<sup>62</sup> the need to articulate an agreed message once the group becomes engaged in overt political actions means that a certain level of acknowledged leadership is needed to achieve campaign outcomes.<sup>63</sup>

Complexity theory offers new ways of approaching choices about leadership and structure. While not constrained by a perceived contest between ideology and pragmatism, its application to SMO's is relatively new and is a cross application

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56 Frank den Hond, Frank GA de Bakker & Nikolai Smith, 'Social Movements and Organizational Analysis', *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2015) 291.

57 Sarah A Soule, 'Bringing Organizational Studies Back into Social Movement Scholarship' in J van Stekelenburg, C Roggeband, & B Klandermans (eds), *The Future of Social Movement Research. Dynamics, Mechanisms and Processes*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 108

58 Neil Sutherland, Christopher Land & Steffen Böhm, 'Anti-leaders (hip) in Social Movement Organizations: The Case of Autonomous Grassroots Groups' (2013) *Organization*, 762-3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508413480254>; Colin Barker, Alan Johnson & Michael Lavalette, *Leadership and Social Movements* (Manchester University Press, 2001) 2; Aldon Morris & Suzanne Staggenborg, 'Leadership in Social Movements' *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004) 171, 187.

59 Carol Hanisch, 'Struggles over Leadership in The Women's Liberation Movement', In Colin Barker, Alan Johnson and Michael Lavalette (eds), *Leadership in Social Movements*, (Manchester University Press, 2013), 77, 85. See also Jo Freeman, 'The Tyranny Of Structurelessness', (1972) 17 *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 151.

60 Aldon Morris & Suzanne Staggenborg, 'Leadership in Social Movements' in editors details *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 171, 190.

61 Carol Hanisch, "Struggles over Leadership in the Women's Liberation Movement." 77-95.

62 Ibid, 92.

63 Ibid, 82.

of highly developed complexity studies in the physical sciences.<sup>64</sup> Much of the groundwork for applying complexity theory to debates about leadership and organisation has occurred in relation to organisations other than social movements. Marion and Uhl-Bien provide a useful exploration of the literature of complexity science and its application to leadership studies.

In the simplest terms, complexity theory moves away from linear, mechanistic views of the world, where simple cause and effect solutions are sought to explain physical and social phenomena, to a perspective of the world as nonlinear and organic, characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability... (c)omplexity theory encourages us to see organizations as complex adaptive systems composed of a diversity of agents who interact with one another, mutually affect one another, and in so doing generate novel behavior for the system as a whole.<sup>65</sup>

Plowman et al<sup>66</sup> examine the contribution of complexity science to leadership and organisational studies, citing leading complexity theorists in the physical sciences such as Holland,<sup>67</sup> Prigogine and Stengers<sup>68</sup> and Kauffman<sup>69</sup> to summarise the salient characteristics of complex adaptive systems, as being *emergent self-organisation*, whereby systems achieve order because multiple local agents interact producing unintended outcomes without the intervention of a central controller.<sup>70</sup>

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64 John Urry, "The Complexity Turn." *Theory, Culture & Society* 22 (5):1-14,( 2005): p1. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276405057188> Eve Mitleton-Kelly, "Ten Principles of Complexity and Enabling Infrastructures." *In Complex Systems and Evolutionary Perspectives on Organisations: The Application of Complexity Theory to Organisations*, edited by Eve Mitleton-Kelly, (ed.) (Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science Ltd.2003), pp. 3-20.

65 Russ Marion and Mary Uhl-Bien, "Leadership in Complex Organizations." *The Leadership Quarterly* 12 (4) (2001):389-418, p389-90 doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843\(01\)00092-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(01)00092-3).

66 Donde Ashmos Plowman, Stephanie Solansky, Tammy E Beck, LaKami Baker, Mukta Kulkarni, and Deandra Villarreal Travis, 'The Role of Leadership in Emergent, Self-Organization' (2007) 18 *The Leadership Quarterly* 341 <https://doi.org/10/1016/j.leaqua.2007.04.004>

67 John H Holland, *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity* (Perseus, 1995).

68 Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers. *The End of Certainty* (Simon and Schuster, 1997).

69 Stuart Kauffman, *At home in the universe: The search for the laws of self-organization and complexity* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

70 Plowman, Emergent, Self-Organization', 342-3.

Specifically, complexity theory suggests that it may sometimes be what leaders do not do that enables creative self-organisation to occur. Marion and Uhl Bien provide a set of principles to guide effective complex leadership. These include *fostering the construction of networks* and interactions between networks both inside and outside the organization; *assisting (catalysing) the building of new networks* through delegation, resourcing or simply not interfering; *acting as, or activating agents* that promote and articulate an idea and an attitude; *dropping seeds of emergence* by encouraging emerging knowledge centres; and finally by *thinking systematically*, by tending to the growth fitness, innovation and the future of the organisation.<sup>71</sup>

Graham Chesters<sup>72</sup> has provided one of the few analyses of the work of social movements from a specifically complexity theory perspective in his analysis of what he calls the ‘Alternative Globalization Movement’ (AGM).

What appears to have occurred within the AGM and what potentially is its great strength, is that its affinity with acutely democratic means and its adoption of a decentralized praxis has encouraged organizational forms that give rise to emergent properties and that the advantages conferred from organizing according to these principles have been recognized.<sup>73</sup>

A complexity based approach need not strive for routinely flat structures in which all actors participate equally in all decision making. Specialisation within niches of a complex adaptive system may, for example, be an essential form of function differentiation. Nonetheless, broad features of a complexity approach to movement-building are likely to include distributed leadership and wide dispersal of functioning rather than a concentration in fixed hierarchy. Leadership can involve a subtle interplay of both hands-on and hands-off approaches.<sup>74</sup> Sutherland et al<sup>75</sup> describe leadership as a performative function that can emerge sporadically throughout an organisation as and where it is required.

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71 Marion, ‘Leadership in Complex Organizations’, 404-7.

72 Graeme Chesters, “Global Complexity and Global Civil Society.” *Voluntas* 15 (4) (2004):323-342. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11266-004-1235-9>; Graeme Chesters & Ian Welsh, *Complexity and Social Movements: Multitudes at the Edge Of Chaos* (Routledge, 2006).

73 Ibid, 335.

74 Plowman, ‘Emergent, Self-Organization’, 341-356.

75 Sutherland, ‘Anti-leaders’, 764.

For present purposes and at its most basic, complexity theory aims to empirically describe processes that enable systems to self-organise<sup>76</sup> within a minimal set of boundary constraints.<sup>77</sup>

By maximising self-organisation, leaders within GFNR enable the movement to adapt quickly and effectively to new conditions. Complexity thinking, and the related Cynefin framework<sup>78</sup>, liberated GFNR to experiment with different approaches to structure and leadership throughout the movement's operations. Instead of adopting a one-size-fits-all ideological position in favour of a heavy or light structure, or an organisation-wide preference for fixed or fluid leadership styles, the Cynefin framework allowed different responses to different challenges, and iterative experimentation as a means to engage with complex problems.<sup>79</sup>

The Cynefin framework expands the repertoire of organisational problem-solving by helping practitioners choose appropriate responses to differing types of challenges, but despite its popularity and influence for practitioners in various kinds of organisations, its use has received limited attention in academic literature.

Within the Cynefin framework, different kinds of organisational challenges are understood as 'domains' with distinctive constraints and network relationships.

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76 Plowman, "Emergent, Self-Organization," 341-356.

77 David Snowden describes constraints in *Cynefin Dynamics*, a blog published by Cognitive Edge: David Snowden, 'Cynefin Dynamics' Cognitive Edge (2015). <http://cognitive-edge.com/blog/cynefin-dynamics/>

78 David Snowden and Mary Boone "A Leader's Framework for Decision Making" *Harvard Business Review* 85 (11) (2007): 68-76

Snowden, David. "Cynefin: A Sense of Time and Space, The Social Ecology of Knowledge Management." 2000.

79 Eric Van Beurden, Annie Kia, Avigdor Zask, Uta Dietrich, Lauren Rose, 'Making Sense in a Complex Landscape: How the Cynefin Framework from Complex Adaptive Systems Theory Can Inform Health Promotion Practice' *Health Promotion International* 28(1) (2011): 73.



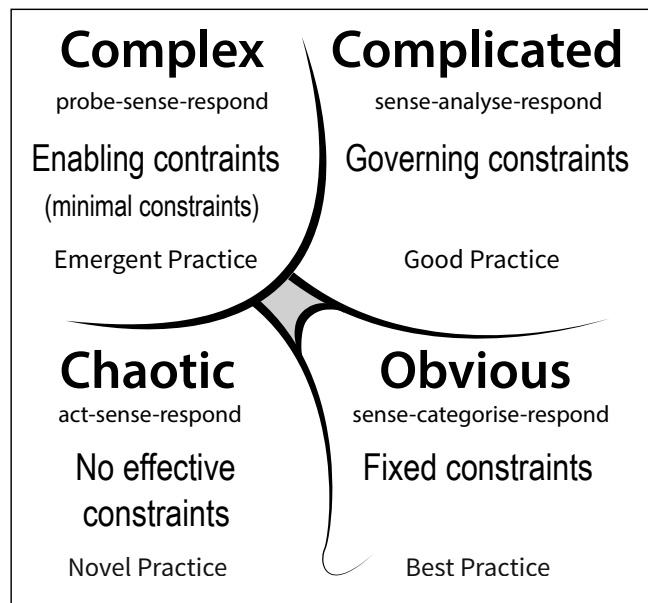


Figure 1 The Cynefin Framework, adapted from Dave Snowden <sup>80</sup>

The four domains range from the *Chaotic* where network connections and operating constraints are almost non-existent and which can only be responded to by novel experimentation, through to the orderly or *Obvious* domain in which a centralised structure of networks is appropriate, and already-known ‘best practice’ responses can be relied upon. The two intermediate domains include the *Complex* domain, and the *Complicated* domain. In the *Complex* domain (which is closer to the *Chaotic* domain) there are still many unknowns, but the imposition of minimal constraints (minimum necessary interventions) allows self-organisation. Here, creative problem solving arises in decentralised network and leadership structures, and iterative experimentation generates emergent new practice. In the *Complicated* domain (which is approaching the *Obvious* domain), good practice can be discerned through collaboration and analysis, made possible by a balance of both centralised and decentralised network structures.

Whilst some experiments may progress through the domains this is not assumed nor necessarily desirable, some types of problems will remain within particular domains throughout, and practitioners are encouraged to recognise habitual tendencies within themselves or their organisation for particular kinds of network settings, and instead to increase discernment and flexibility.

<sup>80</sup> David Snowden, ‘Cynefin Dynamics’ Cognitive Edge (2015). <http://cognitive-edge.com/blog/cynefin-dynamics/>

GFNR needed to flexibly move between all four of the Cynefin domains for different aspects of its operation at different times. Part of the role of the Capacity Builder's group was to sense how the movement and campaign were developing, and to intervene, when it seemed helpful, to assist the growth and fitness of the network overall. GFNR was working with many unknowns – mostly within the *Complex* domain in the Cynefin framework. To adapt fast and generate creativity, minimal constraints were required, rather than a top-down, rule-governed system. The way forward was to experiment, amplify what worked, and quickly abandon ineffective 'probes'. Examples of these 'minimum constraints' were the strong commitment to nonviolence, the representative structure of the regional alliance, and the commitment to visit every house when doing Gasfield Free community surveys.

Although GFNR largely functioned through a system of distributed leadership, it also used more centralised group functioning at appropriate moments; in Cynefin terms, an example of operating within the *Complicated* domain. For example, during the Bentley crisis, tight-knit resident and farmer groups were sent to Sydney to lobby government power-holders.

To intensify pressure, GFNR also used a central database to intensely focus community power, mobilising supporters to call the Minister for Resources en-masse over several days. In Cynefin terms, this was implementing already well-known practice in the *Obvious* domain.

Finally, *Chaos* was never far away, with people acting without network connectivity, or agreed ways of doing things. GFNR was continually nudging the system out of *Chaos* into the *Complex* domain: 'midwifing' new groups into being, or inviting disconnected people into existing groups, and sharing a unifying sense-making narrative. Sense-making commentaries by movement leaders<sup>81</sup> were shared on social media throughout the distributed network to help provide unified framing across the diverse movement. A critical mass of participants with a shared understanding in online groups or face-to-face networks created conditions for collective intelligence, a phenomenon dependent on connectivity and social intelligence.<sup>82</sup>

Effective social movement campaigners traditionally work instinctively with the dynamics of systems that are unpredictable adaptive and complex, so whilst

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81 Aidan Ricketts, 'Activism and Social Movements, An Eternal Part of Human Evolution', *Aidan Ricketts Activist weblog*, August 2, 2015.

82 Anita Wolley et al, 'Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups' (2010) 330 (6004) *Science* 686.

*Complexity* and the Cynefin framework may have been unfamiliar language, it was not counter-intuitive, for many participants it simply provided new words for familiar phenomena.

Annie Kia's use of complexity concepts gave us names for things we already understood intuitively, it helped provide a new language to describe the processes we were using and it helped us design new experiments.<sup>83</sup>

In particular the Cynefin approach liberated the question of structure from being a whole-of-movement choice, and allowed different forms of structure to exist side-by-side where the context required. It was not a model that imposed its own rules about structure, but a guided action learning process in which participants were encouraged to learn and to nudge the system into better functioning or intervene where problematic dysfunctions became critical.

Some structures are very effective at reducing the overall energy drain of a problem such as managing traffic for example, the problem is massively reduced by a small structure that imposes minimum constraints to make it flow more smoothly. Other types of structure get complicated and require more energy to maintain than the energy they save by fixing a problem. So in the end the system itself self-selects which approaches survive. The system becomes very conscious of its own energy drains, maybe because it is composed of mostly exhausted people, so they are very alert to energy drainage.<sup>84</sup>

The time spent building the movement from 2011 through to 2014 provided an ongoing laboratory of action learning for GFNR through which processes of movement building and mobilisation were able to be developed and refined iteratively.

Whilst complexity thinking informed the Capacity Builders group, multiple influences shaped how other participants thought about structure and leadership. These included ideological belief systems, personality traits and also prior social movement experience. The diversity of personality types within movement participants influenced how the system as a whole was able to self-organise and the ability to get on well with others was a prized quality. Potential tensions over issues of structures and processes were often resolved via experimentation.

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83 Boudicca Ceres, pers com. 2015

84 Elly Bird, pers com. 2015

People have different understandings, ways of approaching things. Some people will always prefer a structured response to a system need, others will be more likely to let the system work it out. People would propose various kinds of structure to deal with difficult situations, sometimes it would work and reduce the problem, other times the structured ‘solution’ would quickly break down and the issue would be responded to more organically.<sup>85</sup>

For those participants consciously adopting complexity thinking, the process of adapting structural responses to different contexts ceased to represent a tension and instead exemplified the system engaging in its own processes of self-organisation. The inter-play of personal styles of organisation became a function of the complexity itself.

The working environment enabled people to rise to their own level in relation to their areas of expertise and personal styles. Some would organise highly structured rosters, and role identification, whilst others acted as more fluid enablers.<sup>86</sup>

There was no ideology of ‘structureless-ness’, and no caveat preventing the emergence of formal structure where appropriate. For instance, the group employed a camp manager who ‘midwived’ the emergence of 34 departments to ensure the camp was safe and a place that attracted citizens and their families.

People with organisational ability were able to experiment with structured processes, and if they worked, they worked. Some niches and projects were highly structured; others were very fluid and spontaneous.<sup>87</sup>

The ability to experiment with both heavy or light structure, centralised or decentralised networks and varying styles of leadership throughout the movement and over the duration of the campaign was a key adaptive feature of GFNR that enabled rapid phase transition in the lead up to the Bentley Blockade.

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85 Elly Bird, pers com. 2015

86 Simon Clough, pers com. 2015

87 Simon Clough, pers com. 2015.

## The Bentley Blockade

As the Bentley Blockade approached, the movement expanded rapidly as new networks such as rural fire service volunteers, health workers and farmers became attracted to and integrated into the growing network. The involvement of Indigenous communities was also a defining and central part of the broad-based movement that also grew further as the blockade approached.<sup>88</sup>

As with other contemporary campaigns, social media provided a powerful amplifying tool for the living flesh-and-blood social movement.<sup>89</sup> Instead of pleading for help, GFNR social media campaigns appealed to ‘fear-of-missing-out’ by presenting the Bentley Blockade as a chance to be part of history in the ‘*Will you show up? - I showed up*’ campaign.<sup>90</sup> The social movement became a cultural attractor attracting an assortment of filmmakers, musicians,<sup>91</sup> artists, comedians,<sup>92</sup> priests, politicians and mayors.<sup>93</sup> The need to be ever vigilant against dawn raids by the riot police was creatively re-invented as the popular *Greet The Dawn* ceremony.<sup>94</sup> These daily rites became a signature experience of the Bentley Blockade, as the movement’s power to attract people grew exponentially.<sup>95</sup>

The proposed drill site at Bentley was difficult to blockade, situated at a crest on a regional arterial road. Neighbouring farmers offered land adjoining the proposed drill site for a camp. It was here that *Camp Liberty* emerged, and functioned for over four months as a lived community of resistance. At its peak it was a village complete with an Indigenous elders’ space, named streets, sanitation facilities, 24 hour traffic control, large tents for meetings, first aid,

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88 Hamish Broome, ‘Thousands at Bentley as Elders Unite Against CSG’ *Northern Star Online*, April 1 2014 <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/thousands-bentley-as-bundjalung-elders-unite-again/2215783/#/0>

89 Carolyn Hendriks et al, ‘Performing Politics on Social Media: The Dramaturgy of an Environmental Controversy on Facebook’ (2016) 25(6) *Environmental Politics* 1.

90 ‘Will You Show Up to Bentley Blockade?’ *GFNR YouTube channel* 4 April 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggq\\_6V3Gzeo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggq_6V3Gzeo); ‘Will You Show Up? I showed up’, *GFNR YouTube channel* 5 April 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCDpOOV2daQ>

91 Eve Jeffery ‘Musos Pop-up at Bentley Blockade’, *Echonet Daily*. April 14, 2014. <https://www.echo.net.au/2014/04/musos-pop-bentley-blockade/>

92 ‘Akmal on extremists’, *GFNR YouTube channel* 25 April 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yfP1vHkTSk>

93 Luis Feliu, ‘Federal MP, Mayors Bolster Bentley blockade’ *Echonet Daily*, April 25, 2014. <https://www.echo.net.au/2014/04/federal-mp-follows-mayors-bentley-blockade/>

94 Gasfield Free Northern Rivers (Photograph) ‘Greet the dawn at #Bentley Blockade, Will You Show Up?’, <https://goo.gl/images/F3J9Uc>

95 ‘We Were There’, *Northern Star Online* 17 October 2015.

food preparation, children's space, even a café with espresso machines. All of it managed by numerous volunteers. *Camp Liberty* cost more than \$5,000 a week to run, raised from in-kind and financial contributions of the community. The atmosphere at Camp Liberty is described below by the local police superintendent.

It (Camp Liberty) grew into a small community and it had all the issues you get with larger communities. As the camp grew police responded as they did to any other suburb. There was no animosity, more like a festival atmosphere a lot of the time. We have limited resources and having that site so well organised really took the pressure off us. If it wasn't and people were making police respond, the rest of the community would have suffered. We had limited interactions and only a couple of jobs we had to respond to. It used to worry us there'd be someone sitting on the road and get run over, but that didn't happen... it was self-policing in that regard and saved us a lot of grief and worry.<sup>96</sup>

The main blockade frontline was 'Gate A', 400 metres from Camp Liberty. It was occupied 24 hours a day by a roster of activists known anonymously as 'Simmos', with chains on their wrists ready to lock on to an array of blockade devices. The Simmos provided the human shield of the Bentley Blockade, ready to hold the line in any emergency until mass community mobilisation could take place. A police briefing to the state government described the sophistication and disruptive potential of the blockade as follows.

The sophistication of strategies being employed by the (loose) coalition of issue motivated groups present have not previously been observed by police... monitoring activity around the Lismore police station and obtaining information on catering orders for police resource ...the use of an aerial drone equipped with CCTV capability, ... a concrete bunker continually occupied on a rotating shift some 1.8 metres underground where protesters lock-on to an anchor device...mass lock-on devices enabling up to 100 people to lock on to an object; use of lock-outs on approach roads... mass civil disobedience and disorder strategies associated with any arrest by police therefore stalling custody processes.<sup>97</sup>

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96 Superintendent Greg Martin, Commander, Richmond Local Police Command, Lismore, pers com. 2018

97 Assistant Commissioner Jeff Loy (Northern Region), 'Internal briefing on Operation Stapler to Minister of Police and Emergency Services', 5 May 2014 DOCO11920.

In early May 2014, intelligence reports suggested that police buses were moving up the coast towards the blockade site. By this time, it was anticipated that an alert could draw five to ten thousand people to the site, and the crisis intensified. With community power at its height, the entire statewide Lock the Gate network also ramped up pressure on government. With the blockade now in the national and state media spotlight, pressure on government was intense.

## Culminating moment

On the 15th May, as people prepared for the daily Greet the Dawn ritual, a phone call informed one of the GFNR leaders that the government had suspended the drilling licence.<sup>98</sup> News quickly spread through the camp as celebrations erupted.<sup>99</sup>

Arguably because the protest movement showed such strength and conviction, the government was forced to pull back from the brink after originally intending to deploy a police force of up to 800 officers. It was unprecedented stuff. Of course officially the Minister for Resources Anthony Roberts denied “people power” was a factor in the last minute decision. But it seemed obvious to those on the ground the government couldn’t afford the scandal of spending millions of dollars and thousands of hours of police time clamping down on a democratic protest, not to mention the potential risk to public safety.<sup>100</sup>

The Bentley blockade in 2014 represented a historically significant outbreak of region-wide civil disobedience with mass-movement dynamics. The blockade and the massive supporting community groundswell that emerged involved phase transitions of such scale that it surprised movement participants as much as it surprised government and industry. In terms of complex adaptive systems theory, many thousands of actors interacted as the system rapidly developed new emergent qualities. The NSW Police had a difficult task – planning an operation to break a blockade that morphed before their eyes to have ever-

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98 Sean Nicholls, ‘Metgasco’s Bentley Gas Drilling Suspended, Referred to ICAC’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 May 2014. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/metgascos-bentley-gas-drilling-suspended-referred-to-icac-20140515-zrd2w.html>

99 Ava Benny-Morrison, ‘Bentley Blockade Bids Farewell’, *News.com*, May 20 2014 <https://www.news.com.au/national/breaking-news/bentley-blockade-bids-farewell/news-story/32913debd74d080e6c9f7e93bb898175>

100 ‘We Were There’, *Northern Star Online*, 17 October 2015.

growing collective intelligence and capabilities. The task that faced police was not regular policing, it would have been nothing short of a paramilitary invasion of a community.

## Conclusion

In answer to the question posed at the outset, how was it done, there is a need for caution. In telling the story of a successful movement there is a risk of triumphalism. This story is necessarily triumphal because it proceeds from the outcome of success to explore the journey of getting there. Success, particularly in the often frustrating world of protest and activism is worth writing about not only for the morale of future movements but more importantly to attempt to identify practices and processes that may have contributed to that success. It remains critically important however to avoid attributing a simple cause and effect explanation to the relationship between processes and success. Complexity theory teaches us that cause and effect is in many ways an illusion promulgated by looking backward at the path-dependent process of history.<sup>101</sup> Outcomes will always proceed from prior states or processes, but we must not then presume that those outcomes were predictably or reliably ‘caused’ by those prior states. Unfolding events are in every moment both context dependent and unpredictable. It is with these caveats in mind that this paper has examined the use of complexity theory in the emergence of a successful social movement.

Social conflict is usually complex, involving multiple actors and unpredictability. The context is always one of uncertainty. For this reason, social movement processes need to be speculative, experimental and iterative in order to be most able to adapt to rapidly changing conditions. The complexity approach does not provide a model for success, but merely a framework for working more fluidly within domains which cannot be controlled. Enablers can merely do their best to tend to the growth and fitness of the system as it emerges and as it proceeds towards what always were going to be unspecified future states.

The Northern Rivers movement had a combination of leaders with lived experience, emergent leaders and thousands of citizens who worked together to defend the region. Complexity thinking provided GFNR with a new way of thinking about structure and leadership that separated these issues from ideology.

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101 Eve Mitleton-Kelly, “Ten Principles of Complexity and Enabling Infrastructures.” In *Complex Systems and Evolutionary Perspectives on Organisations: The Application of Complexity Theory to Organisations*, Eve Mitleton-Kelly, (ed.) (Elsevier Science, 2003) 3, 17.



It legitimated simultaneous use of different types of structure and different models of leadership - to suit the ever-changing context. This experimental and adaptable approach enabled the movement to organise and re-organise itself at scale through several major phase transitions and to attract and integrate diverse communities of support. Complexity thinking does not provide a model for success for social movements; rather it provides a framework within which the movement itself continually fosters its own growth and fitness. Adaptability, inclusiveness and iterative experimentation lay at the foundation of the success of the Bentley Blockade, and of the broader GFNR campaign.

In November 2015, more than a year after the Bentley blockade had ended, GFNR achieved its overarching campaign aim<sup>102</sup> when Metgasco shareholders accepted an offer of \$25 million from the NSW government for the surrender of all of its gas licences in the Northern Rivers.<sup>103</sup>

## Acknowledgement

The authors thank all community campaigners – co-creators of the Northern Rivers campaign; Simon Clough, Elly Bird, Boudicca Cerese and Superintendent Greg Martin for their interviews and insights; and Andrya Hart for graphic design.

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102 Hamish Broome, 'Activism Leader: Bentley Blockade Will Go Down in History', *Northern Star Online*, 4 November 2015. <https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/bentley-to-go-down-in-history/2829106/>

103 Melissa Gulbin, 'Victory for People Power', *Northern Star Online* 2015.

