



David Babbs at a rally in Trafalgar Square, London, 2014. 38 Degrees strives to be more than clicktivism and has a visible offline presence. Photo: Alamy

by Babbs, combine the usual roles of full-time activists in the digital age – providing email templates to contact politicians, producing (hopefully) viral videos, even buying ads in the dead tree media – with a kind of professional cat-herding role for a membership campaigning over an eclectic range of issues.

Current examples at the 38 Degrees Campaigns By You site include agitation to keep station ticket offices open in South East England and to keep women's history on the A level syllabus. Over at the main site, a petition to defend the

“Many politicians see us as a problem, not people coming together to solve problems.”

BBC and to oppose the TTIP trade and investment deal are front and centre among the 995 campaigns currently active among members.

Most are directed at the government and the political classes more widely, though Babbs stresses that corporations are increasingly coming under fire – as with the successful campaign to get Asda to restore collection points for food banks in its stores. It's also done collective

energy company switches for members, to save them money.

But when a campaign really takes fire among 38 Degrees members, it tends to be MPs who get the benefit of the flood of emails thoughtfully templated by the group. By and large, they do not enjoy the experience. Conservative MP Sir Peter Bottomley once complained of being irritated by the disruption caused to his work by the “hundreds of emails” he received, saying: “The 38 Degrees campaign is turning off many members of the House. It's stupid.”

“Some MPs are responsive,” says

Babbs. “But it's fair to say that many, if not most, politicians see us as a problem rather than as a group of people coming together to try and solve problems.”

This perspective may have informed anti-lobbying legislation passed in the last parliament, which placed severe restrictions on the group's ability to spend money on campaigns, on the grounds that these “sought to influence the result of the election”. That's exclusively the job of

politicians and the lobbying consultants they hire, apparently.

Describing the Arab Spring revolts, the journalist Paul Mason coined the term “the hierarchy against the network” and that seems to be relevant here. The political hierarchy puts the government at the top, then MPs who pass legislation and below them a layer of activists who spread the party line and get out the vote.

Public participation may be theoretically welcome, but in practice most MPs prefer their majorities silent. 38 Degrees, on the other hand, is a horizontally organised group of citizens with a whole range of issues that they persist in raising – and who, to put it bluntly, never shut up.

They never will either, if Babbs has his way. “As a group, we're broadly committed to social inclusion, civil liberties and greater equality. This doesn't make us especially radical – these are absolutely mainstream views.

“Does what we do make democracy messy? Absolutely. But democracy works best when it's messy.” ■

David Babbs speaks at the Settle Stories festival on 2 April. For more on the festival see Centre Stage, p23

A MESSY QUESTION OF DEGREES

It brings together vast numbers of committed people, changes policy – and annoys MPs with a deluge of emails. David Babbs, founder of 38 Degrees, tells **Jamie Kenny** the online campaign group is more than a quick fix for clicktivists

Thirteen years ago on a cold, bright day in February, David Babbs marched against the Iraq war in London, along with a million or so other people of the same opinion. It was, he says now, a classic example of people power – both in the sense that the people exercised their democratic right to protest and that the people didn't turn out to have much power. The war went right ahead, with consequences we are still living with.

“The first thing I took away from that day was the whole experience of marching with people in such huge numbers, because we wanted the UK to take the right decisions, to be a better place,” the founder of 38 Degrees tells *Big Issue North*.

“The second thing was that despite this huge effort, it didn't work. So what would work? What could we do so that politicians couldn't just hide behind their curtains until everybody got the train home?”

It's a question Babbs, 35, had been thinking about for a while. As a student, he was a member of the activist group People And Planet – formerly Third World First – where he lobbied and demonstrated against arms company recruitment on university campuses and later became an intern at the group's

Oxford offices. It was where he learned how to campaign.

From there, Babbs moved to environmental charity Friends of the Earth, co-ordinating the group's Big Ask campaign, which was influential in lobbying to bring about the Climate Change Bill in 2006.

It's possible to see the anti-Iraq War protests as the last of the great analogue rallies, painstakingly constructed from physical materials and human effort: flyers and leaflets, earnest meetings in church halls, volunteers to sort the transport out and write the words on the banners. 2003 was a few years before the development of truly social media. But the potential of the internet to bring like-minded people together to campaign – and give them a permanent infrastructure – was already becoming clear.

In the United States, MoveOn.org was already mobilising public opposition to President Bush's policies. Shortly after, Avaaz.org was founded to support activism on a global scale. In 2009, they were joined by 38 Degrees. The name refers to the angle at which snowflakes combine to form an avalanche; the slogan is “People. Power. Change.”

“We started out smack in the middle

of the MP expenses scandal,” says Babbs, who became its first executive director after the organisation received enough funding from a couple of private backers, including Gordon Roddick of Body Shop, for him to leave his job. “Our first campaign was for setting up a recall mechanism for MPs found to be abusing their position.”

That issue was popular enough to bring the group its first tranche of members, who pay regular contributions or campaign-focused donations. And – perhaps ironically for a group usually thought of as being on the left – the recall mechanism was included in the Conservative Party manifesto for the 2010 election, though it was later quietly dropped.

The coalition government elected later that year provided plenty of what groups like 38 Degrees need – policies that people get angry about. But having got angry, what do they do next?

“We work in two basic ways. For national campaigns we survey our members to see what is most important to them. Then we vote on priority issues – both on what people think is important and what line members want us to take. After that, staff support the campaign in consultation with members.

“Where members are divided on an issue – most recently the EU referendum, but also the parliamentary vote on bombing Syria – they may vote against us taking a position. Then we concentrate on cutting through the spin on both sides and letting people know where their elected representatives stand.”

Babbs's favourite campaign was the one that contributed to a government U-turn in 2011 over plans to sell off woodlands. It was Babbs's first indication, he says, that this was a mass movement.

38 Degrees and similar organisations have been criticised for providing an easy means for people to save their consciences with a mouse-click, without real activist commitment and hard work. But as well as leading national campaigns, 38 Degrees also provides a kind of clearing house in which members create their own.

“Often the focus is on local issues. We have enough members now that people can use our website to come together at constituency or local authority level.”

38 Degrees is largely its members – it claims a huge three million of them. But a small team of staff and volunteers in offices in Clerkenwell, London, headed