

# Identity as Constraint and Resource in Interest Group Evolution: A Case of Radical Organizational Change

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## Research Highlights and Abstract

- demonstrates that the tools of Historical Institutionalism are valuable for interest group scholars in assessing change
- offers a way to conceptualize and empirically differentiate between radical and routine change within interest group organisations
- shows that a group's founding mission is both a constraint and a resource for radical group change.

*While group scholars have long noted instances of change in overall organisational form—say from amateur scientific group to environmental campaign group—the literature is short on persuasive accounts of the mechanism(s) that drive or constrain such radical types of change. How can we explain groups getting from form A to form B? In this article we explore how tools from the historical institutionalism literature might aid in the analytical process. Specifically we focus on the combination of focussing events, internal challengers to the status quo, and the capability of challengers to demonstrate to key audiences that the 'radical' change is in some way consistent with the founding identity of the group. We demonstrate the application of this approach by examining a case of radical change—a shift in overall form—in a well-known UK interest group, the Soil Association.*

**Keywords:** interest groups, radical change; group identity

## Introduction

Like all other organizations, interest group survival cannot be taken for granted. Before they can engage in policy work—or even influence policy—groups must survive as organizations (Wilson 1973; Lowery 2007). It follows that, like all other organizations, groups will face intermittent challenges of various degrees of seriousness and, as such, can be expected to (at least contemplate and try) adapt and change. While the recent interest group scholarship has explicitly acknowledged that survival is indeed precarious (see Gray and Lowery 1996; Nownes 2004; Halpin and Thomas 2012), little work has been done on what shapes group attempts to respond to adverse conditions and change (for discussion see Halpin and Jordan 2009). In our view, the interest group literature could do with better-developed and more diverse conceptual tools to empirically probe this process of

organizational adaptation and change (see Baumgartner and Leech 1998 for an authoritative summary of group literature). The article seeks to contribute to filling this gap in the group literature.

Specifically, in this article we explore whether some of the tools of historical institutionalism can provide leverage on these types of important questions in the group literature. Resorting to the tools of historical institutionalism makes sense, as it builds on the decades old insight from Truman that origins constrain. In his seminal text on interest groups, Truman makes the point that features of groups that were important in their formative period may no longer seem to resonate with contemporary conditions, 'yet their impress upon the organizational structure of the group may continue' (Truman 1951, 115). He makes the (now well established) argument that initial steps in a groups career will come to constrain subsequent steps, perhaps even to the point of thwarting adaptation as times inevitably change around them. A full decade and a half later Stinchcombe (1965) made the (more widely cited) point that organizations generally were imprinted with the logic of the time they were formed and, thereafter, found the logic hard to shake: it constrained change. In this article we reconnect the group literature with Truman's insight by exploring how the initial step in a group's organizational career shape subsequent responses to challenges and opportunities. We argue that group organizational change—in our case a radical shift in the organizational form of a group—can be enabled by leaders who draw on the ideologies and rhetoric of the originating founders.

To illustrate our broad approach we examine the case of the UK Soil Association's (SA) conversion from an amateur-scientific society into a promotional/campaigning group in the 1980s. The SA is a group that has maintained the same name for over sixty years, but—by scholarly consensus—has undergone a rather significant change: 'converting' its organisational form from that of an 'amateur scientific society' to a modern day 'campaign-group'. Change of this nature might come about by various pathways. As will be outlined below, this case is an instance of what we refer to as identity-led change, whereby change in overall organizational form is catalysed by a (relatively brief and explicit) fight over the 'proper' mission of the group. Though such radical change is not unique, analysing the transformation from the perspective of historical institutionalism is novel (but see Engel 2007 and Young 2008). We begin with a review of the interest group literature. Then, we spell out how historical institutionalism can contribute to the analysis of group evolution. The two subsequent sections demonstrate the utility of our analytical framework in a study of the Soil Association. Our aim is not to provide a full explanation of the evolution of this interest group, but to illustrate the utility of bringing historical institutionalism in group studies. The final section concludes with broader lessons for group scholarship.

## **Issues in Group Organizational Adaptation: Scope and Sequence**

The departure point for this article is the observation that any attempt to gain traction on adaptive change among interest group organizations requires more conceptual attention in two areas: (i) calibrating the scope of change and (ii)

providing for mechanisms of change. In this section we deal with each, offering some suggested ways forward. Let us start with the scope of change.

The group literature has for many decades been dominated by what are variously referred to as incentive, exchange or transactional approaches to group formation and maintenance (see Lowery and Gray 2004). The emphasis in such theories has been with the event of formation, and not so much on the organizational properties or features of the resulting group (of changes therein over time). This is not to say that the issue of adaptation and maintenance have been entirely overlooked: for instance, in his seminal work Salisbury (1969) discusses his exchange theory of groups through an exploration of the evolution of key US farm groups. Rather, our claim is that contemporary group theory has inherited from this literature an unnecessarily circumscribed view of what types of change to expect and thus be sensitive too (i.e. leaderships manipulation of incentive structures). Of course, another consequence of this dominance has been the inattention to the problem of mortality: not all groups survive!

An important corrective has been the influential population ecology (PE) literature, which proposes that poorly-adapted groups are 'selected out' and new better-adapted group models emerge (Gray and Lowery 1996; Nownes 2004). The key insight here has been that not all groups survive, which has naturally turned attention to the conditions for survival. But while PE demands scholars to refocus on survival questions, which is to be applauded, the approach has its (well acknowledged) limits (Halpin and Jordan 2009). Primary among them is that the method of data collection means PE offers a 'head count' of those groups that survive; but any adaptive activity that happens between the two points of birth and death for individual groups is left largely unexplored. Firstly, we do not know whether individual groups change forms or configurations in order to survive (or to prolong life and postpone death). Secondly, the PE approach does not elaborate on the organizational form or configuration of these groups. Is the type of group that is formed different to that which is maintained? And do groups shift between types once they are clear of the formative period? We might reasonably assume that groups, particularly those with long lives, will need to adapt to maintain relevance to both supporters and policy makers. But PE does not pick up on this adaptive process, nor does it claim to.

There may be a lack of conceptual scaffolding to support sustained questioning and empirical investigation of broad group form, and how the form struck at birth may (or may not) change, but the group literature does willingly accept that change occurs. For instance, the group literature is replete with accounts of how groups adapt influence strategies to new circumstances. At one end of the spectrum, as noted above, we see the transactional literature noting shifts in incentive structures—the image one gets is that group adaptation consists of leaders tinkering with incentive systems such that they can influence the joining decisions of members/supporters (for instance Olson 1965; Salisbury 1969; Moe 1980). Involving perhaps somewhat more substantial disruption to a group's operations would be strategy change. It is very common indeed, for instance, to note a shift in a groups broad policy orientation or strategy from an insider to an outsider strategy. There is a rich vein of work talking of broad historical changes among groups between

insider and outsider strategies (see Grant 1978; Maloney et al. 1994; Jordan and Halpin 2004). But what about consideration of broader changes in the overall organisational form that groups are 'established' or 'maintained' in? Other parts of the interest group literature report rather more substantial looking change (see Warhurst 1994; Bosso 2005). Several other scholars report changes in broad overall group form among various types of groups—principally between protest, service and advocacy forms (see Imig 1992; Minkoff 1999). There is no denial that change takes place, but the theoretical tools to make sense of and try to explain it are underdeveloped.

Recent group analysis has suggested a focus on group organizational evolution (Halpin and Jordan 2009). It has been argued that such an account could conceive of group leaders, confronted with ever changing (and probably challenging) environments, as seeking to adapt and transform organizational form in order to continue to survive. Groups are 'maintained' in diverse ways, for varied reasons and informed by different self-images or identities. Heaney suggests that groups seek to create unique identities that set them out from the crowd: identities that may be multidimensional (Heaney 2007). This all points to the need for attention to the ways in which groups crystalize into a particular organisational form, and how (or if) this form shifts over time.

Taking these diverse findings, and building on Halpin and Nownes (2011), we distinguish between two broad levels of group organizational change. The first, radical change, involves a shift in the overall mission or aims of a group: that is, it changes its overall organizational form. The second, more routine change, involves shifts in strategies or techniques/settings that are consistent with the extant mission/aims of the group and thus with the established group form. When we say radical change, we do not gesture only to finely-grained tweaks in influence strategies, but refer to how a group's overall mission and goals shift, and along with it the lower order organisational strategies and settings that serve this end. This distinction between types of change—radical and routine—also provides a parsimonious way to distinguish between paths of radical change. One mode of radical change involves feature-led change—namely, changes to a group's strategies for example add up to (often over long time periods) overall change in mission. The other type of change—we call identity-led change—involves a battle over mission/goals which, once resolved, then leads to filtering down of changes in strategies and settings to 'fit' the new identity.

Calibrating and refining what is meant by 'change' is a first step to developing a more sophisticated discussion on group organisational adaptation. It is a way to be clearer about the dependent variable. Yet, it still leaves the issue of what then shapes such change? The specific problem we address here is how to conceptualize these changes. As it stands, these changes are explained in the end by a basic—but rather general—claim that 'organizations were forced to transform themselves over time ... they responded to internal and organizational stresses and external political pressures' (Bosso 2005, 148, *op. cit.* in Engel 2007, 72). But 'who' adjusts? And what shapes the limits and possibilities of transformation? How much room there is for leaders to steer the organizational evolution of their group? There is no doubt

that external and internal shocks can create opportunities or critical junctures that enable change, but this is just one part of the recipe for change.

In taking up this theme, the role of leaders seems crucial. There is a long tradition of emphasizing the critical role of leaders, or entrepreneurs, in group formation and maintenance. Moreover, even the PE literature which emphasizes the importance (even decisiveness) of environmental selection forces over adaptation does seem to endorse the need for both a focus on adaptation (Aldrich 2001, ch. 3) and a role for group leaders in the process of ingesting and responding to environmental change. The PE literature suggests developing a more holistic group analysis, which acknowledges the role of leaders but critically accepts the shaping role of environmental change and population level pressures (Nownes 2004). They suggest a need for attentiveness to how leaders/ entrepreneurs and members 'experience' and 'feel' environmental pressures and react (including decisions to disband) (Nownes 2004, 67; Gray and Lowery 1996, 250). So privileging a role for leaders should not be controversial. While there is clearly a growing emphasis on addressing prospects for adaptive—even radical—organisational change within group careers, the outstanding problem with this thread in the literature is that, as Engel concludes, 'it does not distinguish whether, why, and how different advocacy groups are able to adapt' (2007, 72).

## Historical Institutionalism and Organizational Change

Despite Truman's initial insight, there is no strong tradition of utilising HI or neo-institutional theories generally in making sense of group change. However, there is a rich tradition of deploying new institutional, and path dependent, analyses of organizations. Assessing organizations as institutions is not novel. Indeed, Arthur Stinchcombe, the scholar who is widely credited with championing a causal style of historical analysis of broadly social phenomenon (and a path-dependent style of argument), developed his initial work explicitly with respect to organizations (Stinchcombe 1965). And more broadly, key scholars of new institutionalism (broadly conceived) have been well established in organizational studies (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Recent work has also sought to organize individual group histories utilising the insights of neo-institutional theories.

A central feature of historical institutionalism is its emphasis on path dependence. This standard or orthodox model of path dependency employs a 'punctuated equilibrium model' (Krasner 1984; March and Olsen 2006). In path dependent models historical flows of events are 'punctuated' by 'critical junctures' which mark break-points where developments take a new path (Hall and Taylor 1996, 942). Between punctuations, institutions are 'reproduced'. The contemporary literature on path dependence has been focussed on enunciating the 'mechanisms' that lead to institutional reproduction. For instance, the concept of increasing returns portrays path dependency as a self-reinforcing process in which the relative benefits of going down a path of development increase over time and thus the costs of switching to another alternative increases markedly over time (Pierson 2000). As helpful as this is, it does not really provide much purchase on institutional change. The literature on path dependence offers two stark images; institutions 'persist and become increasingly entrenched or are abandoned' (Thelen 2004, 212–13). There

are a range of formulations that try to loosen up the 'lock-in' effects of initial steps in sequences. For instance, Pierson refers to 'bounded change', but there is not a lot of precision about when change has occurred. Further, recent research by Thelen and her associates (Streeck and Thelen 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2010) have emphasized gradual institutional change rather than punctuated equilibrium as the typical trajectory of institutional change. While this may be true in many situations, there will always be cases of radical change for which a more orthodox historical institutionalist analytical approach will make sense.

One core challenge is in specifying the mechanism by which groups might take advantage of critical junctures that manifest as 'focusing events' and offer 'windows of opportunity' (or 'windows of challenge')? To date, this has been the subject of much discussion, but little firm empirical analysis in the interest group context. One exception is the detailed work of Engel (2007) on Gay and Lesbian groups in the US. As he notes, group theory has relied heavily on the notion of rational leaders engaged in incentive exchange to sustain the group, but 'little consideration is given to the histories and ideologies—the components of organizational identity—that constrain leaders' available options' (Engel 2007, 68). Engel has argued that interest group 'identity' is a key component in explaining their path dependent evolution. The point here is that even if leaders of groups can spot opportunities, they are constrained in so doing by identity: if the proposed change 'fits' the identity it can be exploited, if not groups will not be able to respond, despite the opportunity. The position might be best summed up as follows; future adaptive change (or responses) made by competent leaders presented with windows of opportunity (or shocks) is constrained by initial (or preceding) crystallized identity.

We agree that identity is indeed a key force guiding group evolution. But, we argue that Engel's position neglects to recognize that founding identity (inclusive of history, ideology and mission) is not simply (or only) a force of constraint, it is also a force for enablement (both for organizational change and reproduction). This oversight perhaps revolves around the argument that organizational identities are 'sticky'. He argues that 'As a given organizational identity imparts a reputation among members and within the elite political context, options for viable action become limited. As identity is reified over time reinforced by each action a group takes, it becomes more difficult to change course or pursue strategies seemingly out of line with the organization's understood identity' (Engel 2007, 74). Organizational identities solidify as key audiences come to recognize that a given entity stands for one thing or another. In the case of interest groups we might surmise that members (or supporters or donors) come to see a group as standing for a specific policy mission or goals, while policymakers see them as more or less reliable providers of policy goods (representation, information, expertise, legitimation, etc.). Indeed, some have plausibly argued that without positive feedback, key audiences would have no basis to 'read' the actions of groups (identity would be confused) (Young 2010). The point is that it takes a repeated sequence of successful interactions for such an identity to be established, and thus it stands to reason that such reinforcement embeds identities firmly in the consciousness of audiences which in turn making shifts in identity hard. As Engel suggests, 'Transitions among identity strategies may be difficult' (2007, 74). Thus for interest groups, identity is a key institutional reproduction mechanism.

We do not dispute this line of argument in the sense that identities take time to solidify, and that they are crucial forces in shaping evolution, but we suggest one crucial amendment. We suggest that it is precisely the power of identity that makes it an asset for potential agents of radical change. If they can frame the case for change in broad organizational form appear as consistent with founding 'ideology and principles' then they can take advantage of focusing events to effect radical change. However, while historical institutionalism has developed plausible propositions on which mechanisms may sustain institutional paths, the approach has relatively little to say on when and what focusing events may become critical junctures through which the path may take a new direction.

Our argument that founding identity can serve both to reinforce, and to challenge, path dependent organisational development—that is can both serve to 'lock in' and 'undermine' and overturn initial group form—rests on the observation that organisations (and interest groups more so) are themselves the site of considerable contestation. Where groups are incumbents, where they serve as established groups with positional and financial resources, and where alternative group formation is not feasible, there is a strong incentive to contest the direction of the group. Thus, it is not always safe to assume that the consensual account of identity formation from Engel holds. In such cases, it seems plausible that losers in previous institutional conflicts are likely to contest their lot, particularly in political institutional contexts (such as interest groups). As Thelen (1999, 385) points out, in politics 'losers do not necessarily disappear'.

This political dimension to institutional change—that institutions are 'the site and not just the object of ongoing contestation' (Thelen 2004, 231)—provides an obvious source of change. If accounts of institutional persistence over extended periods require some element (albeit subtle and ongoing) of evolution or change, then this implies a shift in how we deploy models of path dependence. Thelen says

This amounts to a call for introducing somewhat more structure at the 'front end' of the analysis of institutional development than most path dependence arguments do—by attending to the way in which historically evolved structure limit the options of political actors even at critical choice points. It also calls for injecting somewhat more agency and strategy at the 'back end' of such arguments—by emphasizing the way in which institutions operate not just as constraints but as strategic resources for actors as they respond to changes in the political and economic contexts that present new opportunities or throw up new challenges (Thelen 2004, 213).

It is important to note the importance of focusing events in the deployment of identity based arguments. According to Kingdon, a focusing event is like a disaster or crisis that simply overshadows anything already on the agenda (Kingdon 1995). Institutional reproduction may outweigh pressure for change attempted by internal oppositional groups until a focusing event occurs, enabling such groups to utilize the event to bring about a critical juncture and thus an opportunity to undertake a significant restructuring of the institution. It is important to emphasize that internal oppositional groups may find it hard to bring about a critical juncture, and thus institutional change, without of some sort of significant focusing event.

However, whether or not oppositional groups will exploit a focusing event and actually succeed in institutional transformation depends on the capability of individual/agents and how they perceive the institutional and broader context within they are embodied. As a minimum, agents engaged in institutional transformation must be reflective (Hay 2002, 210). Their actions must be strongly affected by their ability to read off the constraints and opportunities embodied in the specific context within which they operate and, not least, have an ability to learn from past experience. Since the context within which they are situated is 'constantly evolving through the consequences (both intended and unintended) of strategic action' (Hay 1998, 33–51, 43), they are unlikely to reach a state of complete knowledge (Hay 2002, 209–10).

So what would this mean in terms of the process through which identity-led radical group change (change which involves a shift from one broad form to another) takes place? Firstly, we would expect group leaders to respond to internal and external challenges to group survival by adapting the organization to the new circumstances. However, organizational development will be characterized by punctuated equilibrium: the group would remain stable for a long period until a focusing event occurs and may enable internal oppositional factions to create a critical juncture and utilize it. Secondly, the actions of agents are constrained but also facilitated by the organizational identity. After taking initial decisions on organizational form and structural set-up groups are not always easy to change—even in critical junctures where circumstances seem to demand it. This is consistent with Engel's historical institutionalist approach. Yet, we argue that groups can undergo radical organisational change. The legacy of the group may provide oppositional factions within the group with strategic resources which can be utilized to support certain types of change but they also preclude others.

We illustrate this trajectory of group evolution outlined above through an analysis of the Soil Association's establishment as an amateur-scientific society in the 1940s and its conversion into a promotional/campaigning group in the 1980s. In so doing we point to the way that founding mission, aims and legacies become the material of both change and continuity. If skilled agents can make change seem part of a new reading or interpretation of the mission—something the founders in the same situation would do—then they are able to effect change.

## **Case Study: The UK Soil Association**

Viewed from the vantage point of the late 2000's, the temptation may be to assume the SA is just another mass membership campaigning group. At face value this does not seem an unreasonable conclusion: it has a broad-based membership, has a high media presence, advocates in the 'public interest', and is led by a small cadre of professional and media savvy leaders. These are all well-established core features of a campaign group organisational form. But a historical perspective reveals that the SA of the mid 2000's by no means resembled the form in which it was born. Although the antecedents of its recent form are evident, the evolution towards the modern day SA was by no means inevitable. During the history of the SA we can detect an establishment period in which the initial purpose of the organization was settled upon, and the related features of the group established. It emerged as a type



of amateur scientific society, and it existed for a long period in which it performed in accordance with this form. In the 1980s the survival of the SA was threatened by financial difficulties and this situation developed a critical juncture in which the original form—and specifically its purpose (i.e. identity)—was questioned and eventually radically changed. Thereafter the SA entered a stable and expansive period as a campaign group form. We attempt to focus on the specific mechanisms that enable this path—as opposed to another—to be taken. We identify a radical change, in terms of group identity, and the associated strategies and techniques (for instance policy strategy, approach to recruiting supporters and type of staff recruited) which adds up to a shift from a amateur scientific society ‘form’ to a professional campaign group ‘form’.

This article draws on diverse sources to compile a history of the SA’s evolution from formation until the late 2000’s. Several doctoral studies have been carried out on the Soil Association, as have monographs on the history of the organic movement in the UK. These volumes provide valuable information into the various stages of SA evolution as a political organization. To this we added interviews with recent key leadership figures. For our purposes, it was important also to gain insider views of how the SA operates, as this is also considered crucial to understanding the way opportunities and constraints are viewed by actors within organizations (see Engel 2007; Minkoff and Powell 2007). In addition, we spent several days reviewing the main journals and newsletters of the SA at their Headquarters in Bristol.

### **Establishment: The Emergence of a Scientific Society**

The Soil Association was established in 1946 under the guiding hand of Lady Eve Balfour. At its formation Eve described the new association as a continuation of something that ‘founders had fostered’. She says ‘The Association is now being handed over to its members. Its future is in their hands. May they roll in their thousands, and be inspired so to control and use it that it may honestly serve the true purpose of creation’ (*Mother Earth* 1946a, vol. 1, 4). Membership was open to ‘all who accept its general principles and will help to achieve its objects’ (*Mother Earth* 1947a, Autumn, iii).

The inaugural meeting of the SA took place on 30 May 1946 at Denison House. Lady Balfour outlined the aims as follows ‘The objects of the Association are: first, to bring together all those working for a fuller understanding of the vital relationships between soil, plant, animal and man; second, to initiate and generally to co-ordinate and assist research in this field; and third, to collect and distribute the knowledge gained so as to create a body of informed public opinion’ (*Mother Earth* 1946b, vol. 2, 1). Discussions at the first meeting make it clear that the association was crafted to ensure it would fit within charitable rules, thus avoiding excessive taxation. The decision making was to be democratic and not based on scientific opinion trumping majorities—or at least this was the implication of the first meeting—with a letter read out from Sir Albert Howard, stating he would resign because of this very fact. Balfour replied ‘We were very keen that this should be a democratically-run society. That was the issue on which we did not see eye to eye’ (*Mother Earth* 1946b, vol. 2, 6). The Spring 1947 *Mother Earth* reports contests for the election of Councillors at the annual meeting (*Mother Earth* 1947c).

The early SA had two stated objectives, research and education. But what did this dual aspiration actually mean? In terms of research, Balfour was intent on creating a body of knowledge—based on research—that would sustain farming practices that respected the soil. In terms of education, even at this early stage, the target was broader than the transfer of knowledge to farmers—it was more than research dissemination or a farmer education service. Balfour explained that ‘The Soil Association has been designed to create a great body of biological knowledge of the life of the soil, and to distribute that knowledge far and wide to the consumer as it accrues to the cultivator. So it will sustain a research department, and publish a journal or diary for both cultivator and consumer’ (*Mother Earth* 1946a, vol. 1, 6). At this stage, consumers were a clear target. And, saliently, Balfour outlined the Soil Association’s dual mission—serving farmer and society. By contrast, Fred Sykes—a self-described ‘practical farmers’, and a Founder—suggests the SA was formed to serve the needs of farmers—needing a body of knowledge on soil care. The Balfour line has endured, but the tension between the SA serving both farmers and/or consumers has been ever present.

Records of the SA in the early years suggest that in relative terms, of these dual ambitions, the research agenda dominated. It established a Journal immediately, which reviewed books and contained articles on production and related research. At this point, it resembled an amateur-scientific society. Indeed, the Editorial to the Summer 1950 issue of *Mother Earth*, refers to the Soil Association as an ‘agricultural research organization’, which seems perhaps the most factual description of its then functions and practices (*Mother Earth* 1950, 1). A key plank of the early organic movement’s strategy was the scientific trialling of organic methods. In 1940, before the SA was founded, Eve Balfour had commenced the Haughley Experiment at her estate (which she had signed over to a Trust). The Experiment was, however, woefully under-funded. At a 1947 Meeting (3 March) the SA decided to do what it took to ensure the Haughley Research Farms could be sustained (*Mother Earth*, 1947b, Harvest, 43). It took over the Estate, and later made it the Headquarters for the SA. This underlined its commitment to fulfilling a research function.

Education was, however, less well attended to. A Council meeting at the time noted that no fixed sum was set aside for education (*Mother Earth* 1947b, Harvest, 37). A year later they report that it had commissioned a film, audio copies of Eve Balfour’s speeches and conducted tours of the Haughley Research Farm. They reported that a special fund had been set up for Education purposes—but that more money was needed (*Mother Earth* 1949, 33–34). Nevertheless, the pursuit of scientific research cast a long shadow.

Recruitment in the early years was by word of mouth—Balfour encouraged members of the new Association to get more members—‘... in the long run only members can get members. This is a living society, and like all living things it must grow organically’ (*Mother Earth* 1946b, vol. 2, 1). She seems to be envisaging an active membership—‘To achieve its objects, the Association must be a unity as a social organism, functional and purposeful, with each of its component members a live member, actively playing his or her part in the functioning whole. Forward then together’ (*Mother Earth* 1946b, vol. 2, 1). This was reiterated by the report of the Secretary at the first meeting, where he dismissed attracting members by

‘advertising campaign’ in favour of ‘relying on founder members’. Perhaps the fact that Founders were not exclusively farmers, and that they were the sole means of recruitment, created a membership that was diverse from the start? After two and a half years the SA had 2000 members (*Mother Earth* 1948–9, 8).

It was clear at the formation phase that the Soil Association was never intended—at least by Balfour and her (remaining) cadre—as an organic farmers’ union. From the outset, the SA was a diverse group of people interested in soil and human health. The focus on research reflects the scientific preoccupation of members, and not necessarily a dominant practitioner base. Organic farmers’ interests, economic or otherwise, did not appear as a focal point for activity. Indeed, by the early 1980’s, its newsletter reported that, for the first time, ‘farmers numerically do not comprise the majority of our membership’ (Quarterly Review 1981, 1). Where other European countries had seen the rise of organic farmers’ unions, farmers’ numerical superiority for several early decades did not produce a farmers union out of the SA. The timing may be coincidental, but at the same moment that farmers ceased to be a majority of SA members an internal coup took place that saw a diversification from the emphasis on scientific research to that of education for consumers and broad public policy influence.

The argument here is that while the SA was formed in the mid 1940s, it took almost three decades to crystallize into the group organizational form that was evident in the late 2000’s. If thought of as a campaign group, the Soil Association was thirty years in the making. That it made this transformation at all, breaking its initial form as a scientific society, was never inevitable.

### **Critical Juncture: The Rise of a Modern Campaign Group**

Scholarly accounts of the Soil Association suggest quite a clear cut difference between the pre and post 1980s (Reed 2004; Tomlinson 2007). The organization’s early emphasis on the development of farming methods through its own on-farm research and education activities to disseminate these findings to other farmers changed under the ‘new management’. A new leadership cadre took over, motivated by their desire—and the previous incumbents’ reluctance—to engage in trade and market based issues and to adopt a more campaigning stance. Tomlinson observes of this period ‘At the beginning of the 1980s the organic movement began to diversify away from its previous scientific preoccupations, not least with a focus on the marketing aspects of organics’ (Tomlinson 2007, 151; 2010, 1051). Reed goes further, noting that the aim ‘to co-ordinate research and provide information on Organic Farming’ had been eclipsed by ‘a more aggressive and outward facing policy’ (Reed 2004, 255). The new leadership were largely from non-farming backgrounds and met in and around non-farm campaigning events (Reed 2004, 254). According to Reed, a key facet of the new agenda was its promotion of ‘consumer power’ (Reed 2004, 257). So how did this apparent change come about?

The transformation of the SA climaxed in the Extraordinary Council Meeting of 1982, but key actors explain that it was a process that took around 5 years of strategizing to achieve. When interviewed, Patrick Holden explained that Peter Seggar initiated change:

He got elected to Council in 1976 and he started stirring it up on the Council and fell out with Trustees and had a struggle with Eve. Then over following years more of us got on Council ... Eventually we had 5 of us young Turks on the Council, and we had a bloodless coup. There was a very major polarization of view on the Council between the young people who joined the Council who wanted to make organic farming a commercial reality, so we were very interested in standards and development of production systems, etc. And the old guard who were hanging on to the philosophical truths, the holism. They got very precious about the holism in the Soil Association. The irony was that we were also rooted in that deep philosophical and spiritual holism ... but we were young, impetuous, wanted change. ... We took them on and eventually they gave way to us, it was the new organic movement.

The extent of this strategizing lends weight to the idea that the SA was a prize worth winning. Organic farm sector development could not be progressed without the SA being the prime mover. It could not be worked around; it had to be pressed into the service of industry revitalisation.

A key focusing event was the fact that Haughley farms had almost financially ruined the Soil Association. It provided an opportunity for the new breed of savvy leaders to reinterpret the founding mission and the way it was put into practice. This new cohort of leaders argued that the longstanding education and research 'mission' of the Soil Association ought to be taken forward by an even more explicit focus on direct engagement with consumers—in fact mobilising them into supporting the Association, and using them to drive political and commercial actors to develop an organic market. A report of the Extraordinary Council Meeting of 1982, where this change was brought about, confirms that financial considerations were a key factor in bringing on a leadership coup. The difficulty in securing funding for the SA, especially in respect to maintaining quality organic research, was raised. The abandonment of the 'Haughley Experiment' was pointed to as a prime example of what happens when the Association overstretches its finances (Quarterly Review 1982, 1). The view was that scientific work was not feasible, and that more effort should go into market development and consumer engagement. In 1985 the SA moved its HQ from Haughley Farm to office space in central Bristol.

Holden, Seggar and associates emerged as entrepreneurs whose personal effort played an important role in the evolution of the SA. Even though financial crises brought about a critical juncture, these entrepreneurs faced structural constraints as a result of the legacy of the SA and of Balfour herself. But, the spiritualism and holism could be made tools for change—just as they had been a force for stasis under Balfour. Holden and his colleagues skilfully turned these constraints into a strategic resource in the transformation process by arguing that the new organization would better fulfil the original purpose of the SA. The response that emerged from a debate over core mission illustrates that the historical legacy was influential. It is important to recognize that the 'consumer focus'—and the campaigning agenda—was not entirely new, it was an explicit focus of Balfour's founding mission. While Balfour, at least through the SA, did not give it equal weight with scientific endeavour, her references to consumers and educating the general public

were important in legitimizing the 'new' repertoire of campaigning and market engagement that was to follow. In sum, the ideological material available to the 'new' wave of agitators was broad-brush enough to be brought into the service of even radical organizational change.

It is evident in Patrick Holden's account that ideological continuity, staying true to the legacy, was crucial to change. He explained that 'we were all touched by the same ideas, ... we were still coming from that place, about the interconnectedness of things, about the philosophy of get the farming right and the plant health will follow ... if we weren't coming from that intellectual place, we were coming from that intuitive place'. The reforms were constrained—but also enabled—by the legacy of Balfour. The 'change' of emphasis could be linked to Balfour's mission, even though she and others of the 'old guard' opposed it.

This change in leadership also signalled the first substantial change in the SA's structure since formation. The size of the Council was reduced, the Policy Committee disbanded, and 'a smaller management Committee' was established 'which would be able to oversee the day to day business of the Association, while referring back to the larger Council for guidance on policy' (Quarterly Review 1982, 1). At this time members were still enjoined directly to participate at the AGM. Local groups seemed to be the main connection for members. A column in the Summer 1981 issue recorded the difficulty in relying on local members to sustain the Association—noting that local groups had sometimes folded as groups were reduced to a small core of active participants. The 1983 (Spring) Quarterly Review cited a Christmas card recruitment campaign that 'made the biggest single membership increase in our history, after 36 consecutive months of decline' (front cover).

To confirm the change of emphasis towards campaigning, 1983 saw the appointment of a Campaign Director (Quarterly Review 1983, 27). The SA pursued a consumer campaign in 1983–4 ('Eat Organic Message'). It took a view that demand creation was crucial given the power of consumers—if demand were there (if it could be demonstrated) then government would have to listen to them and support the sector. The philosophy was 'first, build its production base ... and its ability to educate the consumer. The public, then, must emphatically demand of the government more food produced under biological systems—this pressure must then be channelled through the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries [MAFF] to increase the research into organic agriculture which, together with increased product demand, will bring the much higher supplies to meet increased demand which our campaign stimulated' (Quarterly Review 1982–3, 8–9). The MAFF said as much, making clear it would respond to consumer pressure where demand is there and needs to be met. Mobilising consumer awareness was a key task for the SA and sat well with the state's emphasis on market demand led sector development. It is notable that despite recent (albeit limited) state funding of organic research, the SA has not tried to access such funds to return to this activity.

Almost three decades after its transformation, the Association continued to claim a high degree of continuity with this initial purpose and its organizational legacy continues to play an important role in organizational reproduction. The SA website stated '... at its heart our mission remains the same—to create an informed body of

public opinion about these links and to promote organic agriculture as a sustainable alternative to intensive farming methods' (<http://www.soilassociation.org>, accessed 2008). Further, as one long-standing staff member explained when interviewed, 'Lady Eve believed strongly that while you can make a difference through lobbying the government, the public are what will change things most quickly, which is why we have stayed strongly consumer focussed'. Whether Balfour actually did say it that clearly is beside the point, the 'post 1980' direction has been enabled by arguments of continuity with founding legacy.

In its own words the SA called itself an 'educational charity'. Its main organizational vehicle became an organization with open affiliation to the general public. The certification service—a separate business from the charity—provided important income: the decision by the state to 'certify certifiers' as opposed to subsuming the role directly (as in Denmark) had assisted SA financial viability. However, its accounts suggest that the net profit of certification activities remained modest compared to the income from donations, members and legacies (Soil Association Annual Reports).

## Conclusion

Group scholarship has made do with an account of group survival that has emphasized formation issues (group birth) and discussed post-formation in terms of 'maintenance' operationalized as sustaining an incentive-based exchange with members. While it is argued that formation and maintenance need to be viewed as conceptually distinctive phases, there is an absence of frameworks to guide analysis of how one phase might shape the next. Recent work, picking up Truman's implicit statement of path dependent evolution, has emphasized the role of 'identity'—and not abstract processes of rational adaptation—as a central mechanism in organizational reproduction. Taking this as our point of departure we examine whether group identity—drawing on 'loose' historical legacies and founding ideologies—might not also be a force for change as much as reproduction. The overriding purpose of this article is to demonstrate that historical institutionalism can provide some tools to unpack this important dimension of group life—not to provide a full explanation of the trajectory of a particular interest group.

Historical institutionalism contributes by providing a heuristic device on which to hang empirical evidence on factors that shape the organizational transformation of groups like the Soil Association. We have demonstrated that the notion of punctuated equilibrium is useful in describing group development, but the concept has to be applied in a relaxed manner because, in a political organization such as an interest group, there is continued internal contestation and therefore continued pressure for change which may materialize into organizational transformation if change agents can skilfully exploit focusing events to bring about critical junctures. The role of leaders in steering groups through rough waters is acknowledged in the literature. Early on in the sub-field, key scholars noted the diverse life-outcomes of groups and the role of leaders in such outcomes (Salisbury 1969). Narratives like these do, however, risk making outcomes the result of an overly masculine sense of agency: group leaders just made it happen. HI makes clear that the direction of group change was shaped not only by the past origins of the group, but also by the skill of its leaders in deploying this legacy to good effect. The contribution of the HI

approach is that it provides some hints as to how to conceptualize the relative role of key agents and of structures in shaping adaptive change. HI brings a better sense of how much influence leaders can have, at what moments, and through what means, in shaping adaptive change.

Empirically, this article provides a neat case of a group with a long history that has engaged in adaptive change. The most salient point is that the Soil Association has changed. That the group has always been called the Soil Association belies a transformation from a group about amateur science for 'new' organic farmers to a campaign group educating the mass public about food systems and the environmental cost of modern farming techniques. This is a story of how a group with a unique identity changed over a relatively short time and in so doing how its transformation reflects struggles for definition and purpose. Activists positioned themselves within the organization and took advantage of a 'focussing event'—an impending financial crisis—to effectively transform the organizational form of the SA by exploiting neglected elements in (and reinterpreting) the founding identity.

What we wish to emphasize is the fact that the SA could have transformed in many different ways. But some were more likely than others. For instance, it could have pursued an organic industry association like its Danish counterpart (Halpin et al. 2011) or a standard organic farm union model similar to its German or Swedish counterparts (Daugbjerg and Møller 2010). But, original choices made at the formative phase of the SA's life constrained subsequent adaptations and moved it in a different direction from its counterparts elsewhere. And, it is this unique trajectory that makes the approach pursued here all the more valuable to group scholarship. It is a logical possibility that the modern SA could transform into a farmers' union for organic farmers from its current campaigning form. But this is highly improbable given its past trajectory and the skill of its leadership in deploying the legacy of the SA to shape the future. A neat and parsimonious account of the SA would perhaps suggest a straightforward research vs. campaign/consumer focus and a pre/post 1980s transition from one to the other. This is clearly a core part of our story, and one could assemble the evidence purely in such a manner. However, as Thelen suggests, the 'losers' of any contest over institutional form (and legitimating stories of 'core' mission) are unlikely to be banished once a skirmish is over, but will remain agents for change, destabilizing the organization (Thelen 1999, 385). Thus, the SA's direction is still subject to significant pressure and contestation. There is nothing inevitable about the SA maintaining its now established campaigning approach. As its previous director, Patrick Holden said in our interview: 'Of the various paths the organisation could take, there are always pressures to go one or another way. It never goes away'. As events post-2008 (including the removal of Holden as Director), suggest, the Soil Association (as are many interest groups) is subject to considerable internal pressure to adapt to changing times. Thus, adaptation—especially when radical in nature—is likely to be heavily shaped (enabled and constrained) by questions of 'mission' (which are subject to contest).

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