

NEW MODEL ARMY

Activism used to be all about what was wrong. Now, from executive suites to department stores, “new activists” are showing how to get things right.

BY JAMES GEARY
AND MARCO VISSCHER

“LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT!”

Some 50 young women—decked out in green army fatigues, pink pumps and pink berets, with pink shopping baskets tucked under their arms—march through the streets of Amsterdam. Just before reaching a large department store, their leader yells, “Halt! Bold women... disperse!” The women of the Buyer’s Army storm into the store, hunting for organic food, fair-trade products and animal-friendly cosmetics.

At first, their fellow shoppers recoil in fright, but they quickly begin to smile as they realize this is a publicity stunt to raise awareness about ethical consumption. And members of the store’s staff? They just wish the women would stop asking critical questions, like “How can you be sure this cushion wasn’t made by children?” and “What percentage of the sales price of this chocolate bar goes to the cocoa farmer?”

In the offices of Stonyfield Farm in Londonderry, New Hampshire, co-founder and president Gary Hirshberg reflects on his journey from “long-haired, cash-strapped environmental activist” to head of America’s top-selling brand of organic yogurt. “I had no intention of becoming a businessman,” he says. “Although I directed several environmental NGOs, I knew very little about

THE WOMEN OF THE BUYER’S ARMY MARCH THROUGH THE STREETS OF AMSTERDAM IN SEARCH OF ORGANIC, FAIR-TRADE AND ANIMAL-FRIENDLY PRODUCTS.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIJN MULDER



ABOVE: IGOR VAMOS OF THE YES MEN POSES AS AN OIL EXEC AT AN INDUSTRY CONFERENCE. BELOW: REVEREND BILLY ASKS WHAT JESUS WOULD BUY.



running a business. But I realized I needed to move into capitalism if I wanted to have a bigger influence. Business is the only source powerful enough to manifest the change we need. There is infinitely more that I've achieved in this role than I could have otherwise."

A few years ago Hirshberg sold 80 percent of his firm to Groupe Danone, the \$20 billion French maker of dairy products and bottled water (known as Danon in the U.S.). You'd think Stonyfield's sustainability ethic would be lost in the profit margins of this multinational, right? Wrong. Since moving to Danone, Hirshberg and co. have revamped their logistics

and distribution system to cut CO₂ emissions, installed videoconferencing technology to reduce air travel, introduced new lightweight packaging and recycling programs and launched a couple more lines of organic yogurt. All this was achieved while the company cranked out annual growth rates of some 24 percent and devoted 10 percent of its profits to environmental causes. Franck Riboud, CEO of Groupe Danone, recently told *The Wall Street Journal*: "Stonyfield represents an ethic and it's an ethic that we at Groupe Danone have to adopt if we're going to be successful in the 21st century."

What could organizations as diverse as the Buyer's Army and Stonyfield Farm possibly have in common? They're both exponents of the "new activism," a method of promoting positive change that mixes social critique with humour, artistic panache and business savvy. Forget the boycotts, the sit-ins, the protesters handcuffed to chain-link fences and the banners draped across corporate headquarters. The new activists—like Hirshberg and the members of the Dutch Buyer's Army—take a fresh approach to getting people's attention and getting issues on the political and social agenda. Instead of wagging a finger, they tickle our funny bones or pry open our pocketbooks, with the hope of pricking our consciences in the process.

The angry, confrontational activists are still around of course. And we still need them. In March, for example, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society pursued a Japanese whaling ship through the frigid waters of the Southern Ocean to highlight opposition to that country's whale-hunting practises. But the new activists are far more likely to deliver their messages in army fatigues or pinstripe suits than inflatable dinghies. By appealing to our sense of humour and our consumer interests, these campaigners activate our instinct for environmental responsibility and social justice too. The result: change for the better.

SOME NEW ACTIVISTS ARE PRANKSTERS. Think of the Yes Men, a team of Americans that last year delivered a keynote speech at Canada's largest annual oil

conference by posing as representatives of ExxonMobil and the National Petroleum Council. Hundreds of oil execs listened with rising alarm as the Yes Men assured the audience that, in the face of a global climate catastrophe, the oil industry would "keep fuel flowing" by transforming the billions of people who would die into oil. Others are stand-up comedians, like Reverend Billy (real name: Bill Talen), who prays for the souls of sinners worshipping the idols of consumerism in American shopping malls.

Some new activists can be found in corporate boardrooms, like Google dudes Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who've donated more than a billion dollars through the firm's philanthropic arm to combat climate change and poverty. Others stride the corridors of political power. Former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore is a dramatic case in point. With his film *An Inconvenient Truth*, he took the issue of global warming, once the sole province of environmentalists, and made it mainstream.

Like all novel movements, the new activism (its lighter side, at least) has a long and distinguished history. "The use of humour as a special weapon against privilege, wealth, war, injustice—a more effective weapon often than serious verbal argument—is not new," says cultural historian, political scientist and author of *A People's History of the United States* Howard Zinn. "The drawings of [French 19th-century caricaturist] Honoré Daumier, poking fun at priests, legislators and the rich, were also part of a long tradition of cartoonists conjuring up wild, funny images to make serious points. The cartoonists of our time are cousins to the Yes Men and the others."

Even though the message may be old, the medium is surely new. "TV and the Internet offer the possibility of visual images to be seen by millions of people," says Zinn. "That has prompted the kinds of guerrilla actions we have been seeing more of since the Sixties. These new forms of communication can broadcast to the world what these madcaps do."

Many of today's new fun activists can trace their roots back to the 1960s and the antics of hippie activists like Abbie Hoffman. In the summer of 1967, Hoffman

"I realized I needed to move into capitalism if I wanted to have a bigger influence. Business is the only source powerful enough to manifest the change we need"

—GARY HIRSHBERG



ABOVE: AL GORE TOOK AN ENVIRONMENTALIST'S ISSUE TO A MAINSTREAM AUDIENCE. BELOW: GARY HIRSHBERG IS CHANGING GROUPE DANONE FROM WITHIN.



and a couple of other Yuppies—members of the Youth International Party Hoffman founded—joined a tour of the New York Stock Exchange and tossed hundreds of dollar bills (mostly fake) from a gallery onto the trading floor below. Some traders tripped over each other trying to suck up the cash. The press was swiftly on the scene and the story hit the television news later that day. In his book *Revolution for the Hell of It*, Hoffman wrote: "We didn't call the press. At that time we really had no notion of anything called a media event."

Elena Simons, commander-in-chief of Amsterdam's Buyer's Army, certainly knows a media event when she organizes one. The department store raid is just one of

COURTESY OF THE YES MEN; PHOTOGRAPH BY RAMIN TALAIE/CORBIS

PHOTOGRAPH BY KOICHI KAMOSHIDA/GETTY IMAGES; PHOTOGRAPH BY PIERRE VERDY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



ELENA SIMONS WAS DUBBED "WONDER WOMAN" FOR HER EFFORTS TO CHANGE DUTCH SOCIETY.

"Social themes we get all heavy about and consider complex need a dose of happy energy"
—ELENA SIMONS

several initiatives from her organization Bold Women, which sports some 160 members across five Dutch cities. Retailers who carry little or no organic, free-trade or animal-friendly products are periodically encouraged to do so—via some comical military manoeuvres by women in green army uniforms and pink berets.

On the Bold Women website (stoerevrouwen.nl, in Dutch), members exchange tips about socially responsible stores, brands and restaurants.

After all, as it says on the site, "Women like shopping, fashion and fussing together." That's more important than ever, say the site's authors, because these women, through their purchasing power, can affect their own environments and the welfare of those in other countries. "We're eating away at the foundation of our structure," Simons says matter-of-factly, referring to the developed world's unbridled consumption of natural resources, "so we shouldn't be surprised if we're seeing that structure starting to collapse." Simons thinks it's high time to save the world, and her efforts to do so have earned her the moniker "Wonder Woman."

Simons is more than a one-issue wonder,

however. In her latest book, modestly titled *All the World's Major Problems and Their Solutions: Join In!* (only available in Dutch, but you can read more about her work at fungagement.org), she addresses everything from poverty to war to environmental pollution. She prefers to call herself a "social inventor" who wants to "have fun with society." She seems to be doing a good job of it. Simons once took a group of people on welfare to an upscale Dutch neighbourhood with a basketful of gifts—including flower bulbs and homemade pies—to thank the wealthy for their generous contributions to the tax system that pays benefits to welfare recipients. That, she says, was fun.

And Simons isn't afraid to tackle serious issues with her tongue planted firmly in her cheek. In 2003, when the integration debate had reached the boiling point in the Netherlands, Simons published (in Dutch) *Fun with Muslims*, in which she detailed her excursions with Muslims to amusement parks and shopping malls, complete with illustrations of Barbie dressed in a headscarf and Ken sporting a beard.

In late 2004, when many people in the Netherlands were seeking revenge for the murder of Amsterdam filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Dutch-Moroccan radical Muslim, Simons enlisted St. Nicholas—the regional equivalent of Santa Claus—to surprise the Muslim community. During Friday afternoon prayers at a mosque in the town of Hilversum, St. Nicholas' helpers filled the worshippers' shoes with >>>

PHOTOGRAPH BY PIETER DE SWART

MAKE 'EM LAUGH

The antics of these activists raise a smile—and public awareness.

Meet Mr. Condom

Say goodbye to boring old mints. At Cabbages and Condoms, a restaurant chain in Thailand, a plate of prophylactics—not a handful of breath fresheners—comes with the check. Looking for light entertainment? Miss Condom travels the country hosting condom-blowing contests. Farmers have been painting condom ads on their cows, while tollbooth operators, taxi drivers and police (through the "cops and rubbers" program) are recruited to hand out condoms. These are just some of the creative ways that Mechai Viravaidya—aka Mr. Condom—has helped reduce the rate of HIV infection in Thailand, which has dropped almost 90 percent since the 1990s. Mechai, whose name is now a slang term for "condom," founded the Thai

group Population and Community Development Organization (PDA) in 1974 to reduce overpopulation by promoting contraceptive use. Using some unusual tactics, such as asking Buddhist monks to bless condoms, the organization helped reduce population growth from 3.3 percent in the 1970s to 0.8 percent in 2002. When the AIDS epidemic hit in the late 1980s, the PDA started to promote safe sex as a way to prevent infection. With the country's booming sex industry, AIDS could have spelled catastrophe for Thailand. ■ **FIND OUT MORE: PDA.OR.TH/ENG**



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: PHIL T. RICH (ANDREW BOYD): "ONE DOLLAR, ONE VOTE!"; THE CHASERS GET ARRESTED FOR DRESSING UP LIKE OSAMA BIN LADEN AT A POLITICAL CONFERENCE; A CONDOM-BLOWING CONTEST TO REDUCE HIV IN THAILAND.



Cut to the chase

Scores of sharpshooters lay on the rooftops in downtown Sydney, Australia, monitoring every movement in "the sealed security zone" around last year's meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Yet a procession of three black limousines escaped their attention. Using a homemade APEC sticker and sporting a Canadian flag on the hood of the car, the creators of the satirical Australian TV show *The Chaser's War on Everything* managed to get through two checkpoints and within 150 metres (165 yards) of the hotel in which U.S. President George Bush was staying. When one member of their team got out of the limo dressed as Osama bin Laden, the Chasers found themselves surrounded by machine-gun-toting soldiers. The men were arrested, but they had—in a

Bush. This team of faux corporate lobbyists appears at political demonstrations smoking cigars and drinking champagne, touting placards like "Four more years. We paid for them!" and "Corporations are people too!" Boyd's alias, Phil T. Rich (filthy rich, geddit?), has big plans to change the electoral system from one person/one vote to one dollar/one vote. "Our presence showed we could still have a good time," says Boyd. "It was a way for people to acknowledge horrible truths and laugh at them." Boyd, author of *The Activist Cookbook*, says he felt limited as a student by the predictable pamphlets he gave out to disinterested voters. Humour is better, he thinks. "It's fun. People enjoy it and keep coming back. They may even join in a movement." ■ **FIND OUT MORE: BILLIONAIRESFORBUSH.COM**

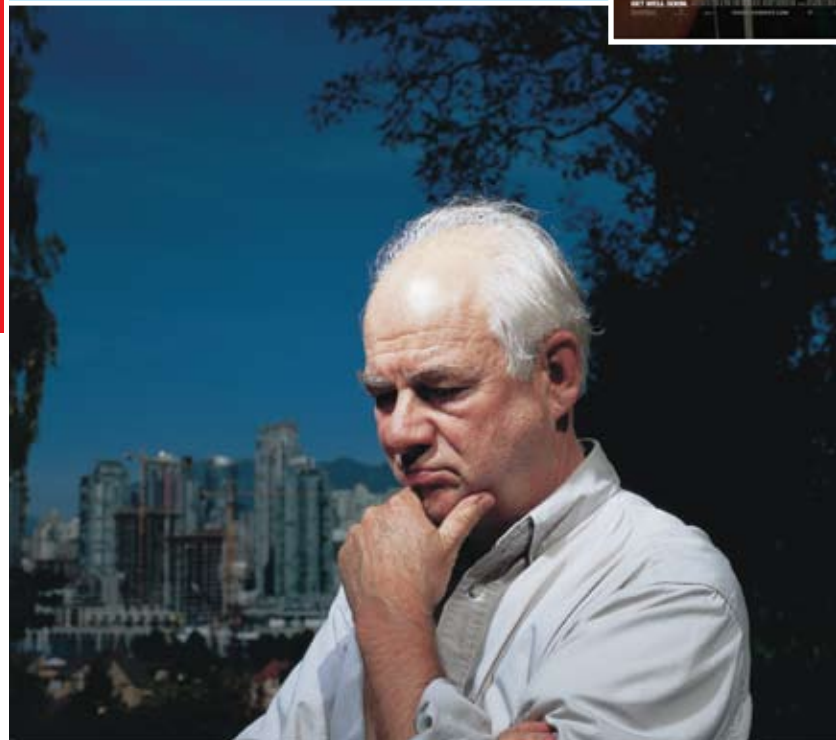
—BY JOSEY DUNCAN, MARC VAN DINTHER AND MARCO VISSCHER

FROM LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL SKUTSCH; COURTESY OF ABC; PHOTOGRAPH BY REUTERS/CORBIS



“The use of humour as a special weapon against privilege, wealth, war, injustice [is] a more effective weapon often than serious verbal argument”
—HOWARD ZINN

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: STEPHEN COLBERT (*THE COLBERT REPORT*) DEPLOYS SARCASM TO SHOW HIS SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT; FILMMAKER MICHAEL MOORE KNOWS HOW TO USE HUMOUR IN HIS POLITICAL MESSAGES; KALLE LASN (*ADBUSTERS*) BELIEVES SPOOFS AND PRANKS ALONE ARE NOT ENOUGH TO EFFECT CHANGE.



little gifts. “It made my day,” Simons remembers, “when I heard that an older Islamic gentleman said this was exactly the type of gesture they needed just then.” St. Nicholas was even invited to drink tea at the mosque with the imam.

“Social themes we get all heavy about and consider complex need a dose of happy energy,” Simons says. “Opinions and heated debates are useful for clarifying a problem, but positive action will solve it. Pleasure mobilizes people and creates an atmosphere in which problems aren’t so problematical.”

SIMONS MAY STILL SEEM EXTREME to some, but more conventional versions of her witty, provocative approach can be seen in filmmakers like Michael Moore (*Bowling for Columbine*, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Sicko*) and Morgan Spurlock (*Supersize Me*). Even comedians like Jon Stewart (*The Daily Show*) and Stephen Colbert (*The Colbert Report*), though hardly activists, deploy sarcasm and satire to make important political points.

As progressive author and radio commentator Jim Hightower says, “They realize Mister Humour is our friend. If you get people laughing, they will relax and are more willing to listen. Poets, comics and artists have always been able to communicate more effectively with the public than politicians, academics and businessmen. Humour is the key to unlock the mind.”

Humour may unlock the mind, but does it solve any problems? Not according to Kalle Lasn, founder of Adbusters, the Canada-based global network of artists and activists “who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age.” Lasn is amused by the new activists, but not inspired. “If all we do is make fun, we’re going to lose. We need something more to stand up against mega-corporate capitalism and media control. We need more than just pranks.”

Lasn prefers good old-fashioned righteous anger and indignation since that, in his view, is what gets things done. “The problem with too many parodies, spoofs and pranks is that they trivialize the matter. We’ll have to wake up to the fact that we are living in a dangerous time with climate change, an endless war on terror and an

epidemic of mental illnesses. If all we do is produce and forward nice videos, I wonder how much good it’s really doing. You hear about a prank, you forward it to a friend and in the end hundreds of thousands of people are laughing and clapping their hands in glee. Nice, but what exactly did we achieve?”

Lasn—who devotes space in his organization’s magazine *Adbusters* both to entertaining parodies on our popular culture and to solid essays—believes “We on the left must ask ourselves what went wrong. We must rethink our strategies from the vantage point of a defeated force. We must poke our heads outside the old lefty box and come up with some big new ideas like true cost markets, demarketing and carbon neutral culture as well as powerful new strategic frameworks like culture jamming, paradigm shifting and meme warfare. After that kind of deep rethink, maybe we can start having some fun again.”

YET THE NEW CORPORATE ACTIVISTS don’t think old-fashioned outrage achieves much. “The world has moved from the ‘There’s a problem!’ agenda to the ‘What do we do about it?’ agenda,” says Australian Paul Hohnen, political director of Greenpeace International from 1993 to 1998. “That takes a new kind of activist. Chaining yourself to a tree belongs in the awareness-building phase, but we’ve entered the solutions-building phase where this kind of treehugging might be counterproductive.” That’s why Hohnen and others think a more business-like—maybe even (gasp!) corporate—approach works better.

The real “new activism,” says Hohnen, a diplomat before he took a leadership role at Greenpeace, and now a consultant to businesses, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), “is practised by thousands of people wearing normal clothes and working inside businesses, banks, universities, government offices and NGOs. This is a class of seemingly dull, low-profile and workaday activists who, dressed in nothing more colourful than a striped shirt and occasional tie, are changing corporations and other organizations in potentially profound ways. This is the community I’m pinning my hopes on for deep and rapid change.”



PAUL HOHNEN IS A FORMER DIPLOMAT WHO JOINED GREENPEACE AND IS NOW A CONSULTANT.

One such incognito activist is Jeremy Leggett, another Greenpeace refugee who was an oil industry consultant before joining the environmental group and is now head of Solarcentury, the largest supplier of solar panels in the UK. Leggett’s path to running a solar company—and its affiliated charity, SolarAid—was anything but straightforward. He used his Oxford doctorate in Earth sciences to launch a lucrative career advising oil companies on prospecting, much to the chagrin of his eco-conscious biologist father. In 1988, he left for greener pastures after reading several scientific articles about global warming. He began a career as >>>

“We’ve entered the solutions-building phase where ... treehugging might be counter-productive”
—PAUL HOHNEN

FROM TOP: PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN CROOK; PHOTOGRAPH BY WEINSTEIN COMPANY/PHOTOFEST; COURTESY OF ADBUSTERS MEDIA FOUNDATION

PHOTOGRAPH BY ESMEE BURGERSDIJK

THE INSIDERS

Don't let the suit and tie fool you; these activists mean business.

Essential luxuries

"Former politicians are said to be cursed with diplomacy and circumspection," says Ruud Lubbers, who served as prime minister of the Netherlands from 1982 to 1994. But Lubbers has used his cursed diplomatic skills to good effect since leaving office. In the mid-1990s, he started lecturing on globalization, at the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands and at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government in the U.S., and was struck by the negativity and misconceptions on the subject. "It was back when the anti-globalization movement got underway," Lubbers recalls. "They believed globalization was a race to the bottom." Lubbers became involved with the Earth Charter, a Costa Rica-based organization that focuses on

Wales. He also authored many books, most recently *Capitalism as if the World Matters*. Porritt's brand of activism thrives on making friends with the powers that be. "If you work with the positive energy you will see a faster process of change than if you bludgeon people into doing things," he has said. "You need to stay connected." ■ **FIND OUT MORE:** JONATHONPORRITT.COM

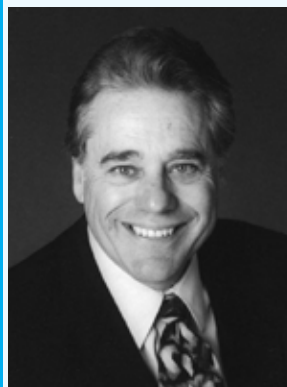
Dressed for success

"Business is the most powerful institution in our society," says Rinaldo Brutoco, who held executive positions in the pay TV and data-management industries before founding the World Business Academy (WBA) in Ojai, California, a think tank

devoted to rekindling the human spirit within business in 1987. "So I believe business should take the most responsibility for society and the environment." He practises what he preaches through his role on the boards of major American corporations. Take the Men's Wearhouse, for

example, a leading U.S. retailer of men's suits. Led by founder and CEO George Zimmer, the company created an employee-centric culture "in which every significant decision is based on values," says Brutoco, who has served on the board of the Men's Wearhouse since the company went public in 1990. As a result, over the last few years the firm has developed profit-sharing and employee-ownership schemes and begun collaborating with a company that provides biodegradable, non-toxic solvent for the store's drycleaning. During the same period, the Men's Wearhouse racked up average annual growth figures of more than 20 percent. It also made *Fortune* magazine's list of the 100 best companies to work for six times in seven years. "With so much awareness of climate change, high oil prices and economic policies that have led to horrific excesses, it's become easier" for firms to focus on sustainability, Brutoco says. "It helps that we're not dreamers, but businessmen who can articulate what it takes to be successful and make a contribution." ■ **FIND OUT MORE:** WORLDBUSINESS.ORG

—BY JOSEY DUNCAN AND MARCO VISSCHER



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: RINALDO BRUTOCO BELIEVES BUSINESS SHOULD FIX SOCIETY'S ILLS; JONATHON PORRITT ADVISES THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT; RUUD LUBBERS, FORMER DUTCH PRIME MINISTER, SPEAKS OUT ON NATURE CONSERVATION.



the upside of globalization by, for example, campaigning against child labour and for best practises in environmental care. "The business community responded well... resulting in what we now call corporate social responsibility," Lubbers recalls. "Just seven years ago, that was viewed as a luxury you couldn't afford." Today, it's considered essential for more and more companies. Shows what a little diplomacy and circumspection can do. ■ **FIND OUT MORE:** EARTHCHARTER.ORG

Plugged in to power

Jonathon Porritt got his start as an environmental activist when he was English teacher in a British inner-city school and discovered most of his students had never seen a cow. So he brought them to the countryside, convinced it was critical to foster a direct and healthy relationship with nature. Since then, Porritt has co-founded Forum for the Future—the UK's top sustainable-development charity—served as director of the British branch of the environmental activism group Friends of the Earth and worked as environmental adviser to the Prince of

a Greenpeace activist, lobbying against the political influence of the very same natural gas and oil companies that once employed him. But Leggett became disenchanted when he saw how ineffective these protests were in creating change, so he jumped ship in 1998 to start Solarcentury.

Solarcentury manufactures and markets efficient, visually attractive solar cells that are virtually indistinguishable from ordinary roof tiles. The firm is a leading provider of photovoltaics in the UK and in 2006 was named the country's fastest-growing renewable energy technology company by Britain's *Sunday Times*. Solarcentury profits are funnelled to SolarAid, which works to combat both poverty and climate change by providing renewable energy sources to some of the world's poorest communities.

DESPITE THE SUCCESS OF PEOPLE LIKE Leggett, storming the boardroom may remain as difficult for the new corporate activists as scaling office buildings has been for the direct action shock troops. Paul Hawken, author of the sustainability classic *The Ecology of Commerce* and, most recently, *Blessed Unrest*, recalls preparing to address the "city fathers" of a conservative American industrial town not long ago when a colleague leaned over to whisper this helpful advice, "Boys, this will be like teaching a mule to play the violin. The mule won't like it and it won't sound pretty."

Sustainability is still a hard sell in Hawken's view, especially in the U.S. "The U.S. is bringing up the rear as it has in all corporate matters with respect to the environment," he says. "In Germany, Sweden, the UK, it is front and centre. In Japan, it is a deep strategic issue on the board level. In the U.S., there are still boards that literally are asking if this is a trend, and if so, when it will pass. There is a huge mismatch between what the world needs now in terms of leadership and who is sitting on the audit committees." All the more reason, the corporate activists argue, to have your own people on the inside.

No one is suggesting activism should be

all fun and games, not even some of the zanier practitioners of post-modern protest. Then do we still need the inflatable dinghy brigades? "Yes, more than ever!" exclaims Jacques Servin, who typically goes by the *nom de plume* Andrew Bichlbaum when he's agitating with the Yes Men.

Nor do many people suggest that men and women in sharp business suits are the best candidates to address every issue. "Nothing would happen without agitation," says Jim Hightower. "We've always had activists who were angry, and we'll always need them. Everyone knows you need both humour and outrage."

Even Hohnen urges a full palette of protest. "In some countries, banner hangings are passé. In others, they may still be relevant. In still others, they are not legally possible. It's not a one-size-fits-all world. The key thing is to think of the new activism as what achieves the greatest amount of positive change with the minimum inputs."

Hawken agrees. "This is not a time for crumpets and tea. This is a time for transformation. Corporations have had decades to twiddle their thumbs. Now is the time for action, and every conceivable non-violent means possible should be deployed. ... We need activists more than we ever have in our history."

So the next time you're out shopping for a cheap T-shirt, don't be surprised if an audacious army of ethical consumers descends on the clothing department. And the next time you're strolling the corridors of some major or minor corporation, check out the executives' attire. Some of them may be wearing pink berets.



JEREMY LEGGETT (LEFT) DISCUSSES SOLAR TECHNOLOGY WITH KEN LIVINGSTONE, MAYOR OF LONDON.



WATCH VIDEOS OF THE YES MEN, REVEREND BILLY, MR. CONDOM, BILLIONAIRES FOR BUSH AND OTHER ACTIVISTS: ODEMAGAZINE.COM/ACTIVISM

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF WORLD BUSINESS ACADEMY; COURTESY OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION; PHOTOGRAPH BY GERARD CERLES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

COURTESY OF SOLARCENTURY.COM

JAMES GEARY is the executive editor and MARCO VISSCHER the managing editor of Ode.