

The Financial Times | By Robert Shrimmsley | September 15, 2023

How social media killed the protest

There were a few seconds when my heart sank. As the two hecklers jumped up with their banner and started shouting during an event I was moderating, a number of thoughts went through my head — and none of them owed much to the power of positive thinking.

The moment came at the FT Weekend Festival while I was chairing a panel about the Labour party. The headline guest was shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves, who I had just started asking about her recent decision to rule out any new wealth taxes when two protesters jumped up to point out she had recently decided to rule out any new wealth taxes.

After the inevitable moment of panic and unprintable thoughts, questions flooded into my brain. How do I speed the end of this interruption? Who are these people? What kind of wealth protesters can afford to pay the three-figure entrance fee to get into the FT Weekend Festival?

Then I was rescued by my own irritation. I had just asked the very question they wanted put. So I asked if they would like to hear the answer or just wanted to shout? Apparently taken aback, they hesitated before remembering that they wanted to shout. But the hesitation was fatal, we pressed on until festival staff arrived at which point they piped down and meekly departed.

Afterwards, though, my main emotion was scorn. These were entirely hopeless protesters. There were far too many words on their banner and even now I can't remember the name of their organisation. Worse still, they folded at the first sign of authority. I mean, seriously, I've seen more spirited resistance from the spawn when we ask them to help with the chores.

Maybe I'm being unfair. (...) Two days later their behaviour was partially explained when I received a press release detailing their heroic assault on Fortress Hampstead with a photo and video of their triumph. Having got the shot, there was no need to stay.

What the episode did illustrate is that, for a certain type of activist, politics has been reduced to performance art. Two minutes of disruption, a video and a press release is taking the place of any attempt at the hard yards of winning hearts and minds.

If this is the way protests are going to go in future, perhaps we can reach a utilitarian accommodation in which we delay the start of any targeted event for two minutes so that a couple of protesters can get some footage of themselves shouting the slogan they hashed out over a glass of Casillero del Diablo. They then agree to go quietly.

Gesture politics has always been with us but what is striking about so many social media-driven demonstrations is the lack of any political strategy underpinning them. It is as if the performance is the only objective. There is no plan to persuade and, in some cases — notably the road-blocking climate protesters — there seems to be a conscious effort to alienate ordinary people and lose support (though at least the road-blockers are prepared to suffer arrest and prosecution).

It is summed up by throwing orange confetti over an ex-politician at his wedding, an act so pointless that the performance is the only possible goal. Yes, you get noticed but if there is no plan to convert that attention into support that politicians have to take seriously, then you are merely an attention-seeker.

Like the hashtag activism of social media, so much political campaigning seems to be about the campaigner not the cause. It is about a photo for your Insta feed. It's the kind of politics that changes nothing but makes you feel good about yourself. It is campaigning for those who want to think of themselves as activists but can't really be bothered to carry it through.

On the other hand, as someone who participates in public events, perhaps I shouldn't complain. This is the kind of low-impact intervention that suits everyone.

2023 was the year governments looked at the climate crisis – and decided to persecute the activists

Injustice is easy to oppose after it has receded into the past, and there is no cost to imagining yourself as a hero long after the event. Everyone celebrates the suffragettes now, but at the time they were vilified as hateful spinsters and terrorists. McCarthyism is a pejorative political label on right and left alike now, but at his peak, more Americans approved of Senator Joseph McCarthy than frowned on his witch-hunt. Most people would like to believe they'd have stood up against the homophobia of 1980s Britain – yet, by 1987, only 11% of the British public believed same-sex relations to be “not wrong at all”.

Which takes us to climate activism. This year has seen a global onslaught against people agitating for more action to mitigate the worst effects of the climate crisis. Courts can issue stern judgments, but so can history, and you have to wonder its future verdict on how the persecution and silencing of those raising the alarm only escalated when the scientific evidence had become so cast-iron, and when extreme weather events hammered home the imminent danger facing the human species. Here in Britain, a government which is renegeing on its climate commitments – not least by expanding oil and gas licences – is simultaneously introducing repressive legislation to silence those holding them to account.

After punitive sentences were handed down to climate activists, the UN's rapporteur for climate change and human rights suggested in November that the sentences potentially breached international law. Indeed, earlier this month, the 57-year old climate activist Stephen Gilling was sentenced to six months in prison. His crime? Participating in a peaceful slow march in protest against new oil and gas licences – something that is now prohibited by the Public Order Act 2023. In the space of a month, at least 470 peaceful protesters were arrested with the aid of the raft of authoritarian measures driven through by Tory rule.

Like the climate emergency itself, the persecution of those fighting it is a global phenomenon. At the recent Cop28 summit in Dubai, protesters suffered restrictions on what they and their signs could say and where they could walk. The French government outlawed the climate activist group Earth Uprising under the dubious pretext that it fomented violence; this was rightly labelled by human rights activists as appearing “wholly disproportionate in violation of France's obligations under international law”.

In Australia, new laws imposed steeper prison sentences and fines against climate protesters: all this, as Human Rights Watch notes, as the country faces “an onslaught of record-breaking temperatures, floods, and bushfires in recent years”. In New South Wales, meanwhile, punitive laws to crack down on climate protesters were last week ruled to be unconstitutional because they undermined “freedom of political communication”.

Meanwhile, climate activists suffer coordinated attempts to portray them as dangerous extremists. Take the Atlas Network, an influential global grouping of rightwing thinktanks: it has helped lead campaigns across the world to demonise climate activists as dangerous extremists. A report by the climate platform DeSmog argues that this has had real consequences: from the portrayal of the German climate movement Last Generation as de facto terrorists, which helped lay the foundation for police raids against its activists, to the British thinktank Policy Exchange, which is reportedly part of Atlas, publishing a report denouncing Extinction Rebellion as an “extremist organisation seeking the breakdown of liberal democracy and the rule of law”. Rishi Sunak later said that Policy Exchange's work had helped the government in drafting its legislation to crack down on such protesters.

Again, what will our descendants think, not least as they inhabit a world battered by the consequences of today's failures to address an existential emergency, knowing we were in full possession of the facts? Two months ago, an international team of scientists warned the Earth's vital signs were in a worse state than in any time in human history, imperilling the future of life itself. From extreme weather events to drought, famine to forced population movements, a bleak future beckons unless the warnings of embattled climate activists are heeded.

What is happening is hardly subtle. There is a calculated attempt to claim that the *real extremists* are not those who imperil our world's future by fighting policies that would limit carbon emissions, but those seeking to prevent impending calamity. The truth is these climate activists are being targeted not because they are protesting in the wrong way or because their methods are counterproductive, but because they have secured such a considerable platform to make the climate emergency a more salient and discussed issue. Understandably, vested interests profiteering at the expense of the planet have every motive to shut them up.

There are politicians with loud voices who acknowledge that the climate emergency is indeed real, but either say nothing when these climate activists face coordinated campaigns to silence them, or even render themselves complicit. In hindsight, it seems so obvious to accept the righteousness of those who fought for the rights of women to vote, or who stood against McCarthyite intimidation, or who fought for gay rights. But these were often lonely battles, and those vindicated by history paid heavy costs at the time. If the climate activists warning of the gravest threat humanity has yet faced are silenced into 2024, we all may find ourselves paying an intolerable price.

In adopting suffragettes as role models, Just Stop Oil is painting itself into a corner

Who doesn't love the suffragettes? A group of women who are heroic, right, and, perhaps most advantageously for their collective reputation, no longer with us. Even the older and more exhausting ones have yet to be firmly identified, unlike so many of their successors, as Karens.

In adopting the suffragettes as role models, along with their slogan, "**deeds not words**", Just Stop Oil has, rather brilliantly, picked a group that unites in admiration left and right, old and young, and, probably uniquely, Jeremy Corbyn and the current – at the time of writing – home secretary, Suella Braverman. Corbyn once stole into parliament to erect a plaque to Emily Wilding Davison. Braverman's horror of protests has not stopped her reminding girls: "Always remember the suffragettes who gave you and me the right to vote, and cherish that right." In 2018, the centenary of partial women's suffrage, Theresa May paid tribute to Emmeline Pankhurst, founder and leader of the proudly militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), whose supporters engaged in arson, bombings, window smashing, spitting and throwing missiles at MPs. Postal workers were burned, a full theatre ignited.

The more closely, then, that it identifies with the suffragettes and their protests, the more nimbly Just Stop Oil and its supporters can deflect contempt for its (comparatively muted) tactics, and ignore curators' warnings to the effect that activists "severely underestimate the fragility of objects". You don't like attacks that could destroy venerated paintings? The suffragettes did that! Would you blaspheme against the suffragettes?

Last week's hammer attack in the National Gallery on Diego Velázquez's painting, *The Toilet of Venus, or Rokeby Venus* (the gallery persists in associating it with the home address of an English collector who relished its depiction of Venus's "backside"), was Just Stop Oil's most explicit channelling to date of suffragette iconoclasm. Before slashing the Velázquez with a meat cleaver in 1914, in one of a series of art attacks that generated massive, outraged publicity for the WSPU, the perpetrator, Mary Richardson, had prepared a statement: "I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the government destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history."

In the updated, climate-inspired double act, featuring blows to another part of the painting, it now appears to symbolise Richardson's direct action, as opposed to anything related to the current cause: **stopping oil and gas licensing. "Women did not get the vote by voting," one protester explained, in a video in front of their work. "It is time for deeds not words." Her (male) companion: "Politics is failing us. It failed women in 1914 and it is failing us now"**.

Though they might not have anticipated the Velázquez nude being conspicuously less treasured, to judge by the public reaction, than Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (the protesters' soup target in 2022), the adventure could hardly have gone better. For a day or so, everyone was talking about Just Stop Oil. The suffragette connection was reinforced, the painting was not known to be harmed; in fact, thanks to Esther McVey, one of the Conservatives' many MP-GB News presenters, the young glass-breakers were able to style themselves as superior art lovers. "How dare these criminals storm our National Gallery & use hammers to smash a painting depicting the suffragette movement," McVey tweeted. When everyone knows that Velázquez infinitely preferred constitutional suffragists like Millicent Fawcett, possibly the inspiration for his *Old Woman Frying Eggs*.

"These people make our laws," commented a Just Stop Oil connoisseur. "Am lost for words."

Following this triumph – the attack has been internationally reported – anyone interested in John Singer Sargent's portrait of Henry James might want to get there asap, while it's intact. For as long as Just Stop Oil re-enacts episodes in suffragette history, circa 1914, the painting, hanging, bold as you like, in the National Portrait Gallery, is asking for it. After Richardson was imprisoned, the portrait of James (who sympathised with the women's movement) was slashed with a meat cleaver by Mary

Wood, “an elderly woman of distinctly peaceable appearance”. Her explanation: “I have tried to destroy a valuable picture because I wish to show the public that they have no security for their property nor for their art treasures until women are given the political freedom.”

Maybe it’s some comfort to nervous museums that, as the Just Stop Oil activists will know, suffragette militancy – naturally the highlight in dramatised versions of the struggle – was not revived after its suspension when war broke out, having contributed to, rather than realised, electoral reform. That the more extreme acts alienated supporters and delayed suffrage has been plausibly argued. If, as the National Gallery protesters said, “politics failed women in 1914”, it worked better in 1916, when suffragists forged an alliance with the Labour party. “In the key moment of the reform,” Dawn Langan Teele writes in *Political Origins of the Female Franchise*, “militant activity was non-existent.”

To put it another way, “the suffragettes did it” is not necessarily the all-encompassing authorisation that Just Stop Oil and other supporters of vandalising paintings like to think. What if neither Venus nor Henry James even needed slashing in the first place?

Which isn’t to say “deeds not words” isn’t a great slogan to challenge political apathy on climate change, and that suffrage groups from the age of corsets aren’t promising models for climate activism in 2023. Almost miraculously, people seem to feel as unstintingly positive about the not always amiable senior Pankhurst as they did about George Orwell, before he was found to be mean. Activists from Just Stop Oil have even been able to forgive Richardson, the Venus slasher, for signing up, in the 1930s, as an organiser in Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists. But you can’t help thinking there might be, if irreplaceable art is to be regularly in jeopardy, more convincing arguments for this method.

The Guardian | By Rupert Read | November 8, 2023

Rupert Read is the author of Extinction Rebellion: Insights from the Inside and Co-Director of the Climate Majority Project

Extinction Rebellion’s future is far less radical than its past

Gail Bradbrook, co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, **has been found guilty of criminal damage**, after she broke a window at the Department for Transport in an ecologically motivated protest against HS2 in 2019.

The timing of Bradbrook’s verdict is almost exquisitely ironic. Five years ago last week, **Extinction Rebellion** was launched in Parliament Square. Back then, a principal term of criticism lobbed at XR was that it was “alarmist”. Five years on, it’s plainly visible that it was not.

In the past few months the process of climatic decline has dramatically accelerated, and we are exceeding many of the supposed worst-case scenarios laid out in climate models. We are plainly hurtling towards 1.5C of global over-heat, long before most seemingly well-informed people thought we would.

And yet despite this, our climate protest movement in the UK today is nowhere near strong enough to force a change of course. XR’s “scare-mongering” over the existential threat facing us may have been decisively vindicated, but it was never able to recover its reputation from the Canning Town incident in October 2019, when rebels inexplicably stopped underground trains running – to much public criticism. Since then, it has struggled to assert itself as a credible vehicle for truly mass mobilisation.

Many significant organisations and movements have emerged in its wake. The most attention-grabbing have been from the recent, even more radical flank of the UK’s climate movement – first **Insulate Britain** and then **Just Stop Oil** – who have blocked the M25, stopped test matches and much more. **To me, these activists are obviously on the right side of history. But at the same time, many in the broader climate movement now feel that action that disrupts the general public has**

become counterproductive – as XR came to learn. Citizens already feel the alarm has been raised. Right now, they don't need further reminders: they need a journey into positive, effective action that they feel *includes them*.

I moved on from XR in 2020, judging it likely that it had achieved most of what it was capable of achieving (a huge raising of climate consciousness – not to mention a parliamentary declaration of climate and environment emergency, a net zero law, and a parliament-backed citizens' assembly on climate). But what is now plainly obvious is that the most important achievement of XR may turn out to be the space it opened up for a new, moderate flank in the climate movement to emerge.

XR successfully dragged the whole eco-agenda into the light of day, and this has made it both necessary and possible for a wave of novel organisations and initiatives to fill the vacuum; groups such as Wild Card, Community Climate Action, Lawyers for Net Zero, Purpose Disruptors and Zero Hour. Indeed, many of the successes of historical movements that inspired XR (the Suffragettes, for instance) followed a similar pattern: an agenda-shift prompted by radical-flank initiatives paving the way for actual political success by more moderate agents of change.

What has become abundantly clear since XR launched is that, in order to make any real impact on the desperate situation we are slipping into, movements must now unite people in campaigns that they can actually get on board with. That means acting with others where they live, or work or pray – and within the law.

XR itself knows this is the way forward, and seems to have learned from past mistakes. As of 2023, it will no longer disrupt the public. XR's new strategy, optimistically titled "Here comes everyone", plans to build on the clearest success of the movement so far. In April, it mobilised about 60,000 people – considerably more than at any previous moment in its history – in a peaceful march on the climate crisis. But it will be a long road ahead for XR from here; it will be hard work to fully detoxify its brand. The best prospect for a huge XR resurgence lies in the possibility that the coming climate disasters may help to grow and rejuvenate its ranks.

Those of us who stood up and were counted at the launch of XR can be justly proud. But of course, it's not as if XR's main objectives were actually achieved (XR's second demand was for carbon net-zero by 2025). If there is to be any chance of achieving a transformative adaptation to the self-imposed threat of ecological collapse, it's going to require not just a minority, but most of us, to step up.

In decades to come, the only question our children will have any real interest in is: now that it's becoming clearer what can effectively achieve change, how will *you* act? And once you knew, what did you do?

The Guardian | By Damien Gayle | October 6, 2023

Green energy magnate to switch support from Just Stop Oil to Labour

Dale Vince, the green energy magnate, has said he is to stop funding direct action climate groups such as Just Stop Oil and instead funnel money towards getting the vote out for Labour at the next general election.

The Ecotricity founder, who has funded a string of disruptive environmental protest groups, has supported Just Stop Oil since its inception, and has previously said his funding for the group has totalled "some hundreds of thousands".

This summer, Vince took to the streets with the climate protesters, joining their campaign of slow marches in central London.

He said that even though he was still "comfortable with their methods", Just Stop Oil's tactics had not worked fast enough and it was time for a new strategy.

"The next general election is the most important of our lifetimes," he wrote in the Guardian.

"And what the Tories will do if they get another stretch in power is crystal clear: abandon net zero, open new coalmines and oilfields, and continue presiding over spiralling living costs. And so today I announced a change of direction: I am no longer going to fund Just Stop Oil. Under the current government, protest cannot work. I would go so far as to say that anything that could feed the Tories' culture-war narrative is counter-productive.

"The dividing lines have been drawn: Labour is green, the Tories are not. A vote for anyone other than Labour, or no vote at all, is a vote for another Tory government – this time with a mandate to pursue its anti-green crusade. Preventing that from happening is the only way to 'just stop oil'."

As well as funding direct action protest groups, Vince has given at least £1.5m to Labour over the past decade. His funding for both had led to accusations from the prime minister that "eco-zealots" were writing the opposition's energy policies.

Labour has said that if elected it would grant no new licences for oil and gas projects, a key demand of Just Stop Oil, as well as begin a programme of retrofit insulation for 19m homes, which was a key demand of the environmental activist group Insulate Britain.

A green policy offering led by Ed Miliband, the shadow climate change and net zero secretary, also includes plans to quadruple off-shore wind, change planning rules to ease the way for more on-shore wind projects and an upgrade to the electricity grid, create a new public-private energy company and reach £28bn in green investment by the end of the second half of a Labour-led parliament.

By contrast, Rishi Sunak last month announced U-turns on a number of green initiatives, pushing back the deadline for ending sales of new petrol and diesel cars and the phasing out of gas boilers, in an effort to draw populist dividing lines between the Conservatives and Labour as his party trails in the polls.

Just Stop Oil said most of its funding came from private individual donations. An initiative by Vince to match donations over 48 hours in May raised £340,000 for the campaign. It has also received significant sums of money from the Climate Emergency Fund, a US philanthropic fund that directs money from donors to direct action groups around the world.

Margaret Klein Salamon, the executive director of the Climate Emergency Fund, said: "Climate Emergency Fund is proud to be a funder of Just Stop Oil because we believe that non-violent disruptive protest is the fastest way to create transformative change. While these activists are controversial, they are correct about the science, about the efficacy of their approach, and they are morally righteous.

"It's time to wake up. These are not normal times. The climate emergency is accelerating, and all of us should be looking for the most effective ways to deploy our time and resources. We thank Dale Vince, and anyone who is willing to support these brave and effective activists, and we hope more funders will join us."

A Just Stop Oil spokesperson said: "We are grateful to Dale Vince for his amazing financial and moral support over the past year. He has willingly given up his time to help mobilise people to take action to end new oil and gas. We can all see the need to remove this genocidal government from office and so we wish Dale well in his next campaign.

However, we remain convinced that politics is utterly broken and the Labour party is tinkering around the edges while the world burns. More and more people are coming round to what really works – civil resistance."

New measures to silence climate activists? They'll only spur us on.

On a day when swans were seen swimming through Worcester town centre after the latest flooding, the government has announced new measures to silence those of us pushing for more climate action.

The latest restriction on your freedoms involve the police in England and Wales having the power to shut down protests *before disruption begins*. The proposals will be part of an amendment to the public order bill, which already includes new stop and search powers and creates an offence of "locking on" to things.

So far, the government has gone out of its way to characterize nonviolent civil resistance and peaceful protest as dangerous and criminal. Now the government is going even further. [...]

The supporters of Just Stop Oil are many different things but what they have in common is a deep concern for the future of humanity and a firm commitment to the principles of nonviolent civil resistance.

Resistance is necessary because politics is broken. Our democracy is dead on its feet. All avenues for legitimate protest are being closed, one by one. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act has effectively banned noisy protests. The public order bill bans "slow marching". How are we to express our dissent? [...]

The police already have adequate powers to arrest people for obstructing the highway. Blocking roads is already illegal. The proposed powers will give them carte blanche whenever a political demonstration is happening nearby. [...]

These new legal powers will simply speed up the slow collapse of the justice system. Fair Trials reports that the number of people being held in prison on remand in England and Wales is at its highest for more than 50 years, with 1,800 people being held without trial for at least a year. As I write, 10 Just Stop Oil supporters remain on remand².

Just Stop Oil is not a fashionable cause or a protest movement. Our supporters are doing what the suffragettes did and what the civil rights movements did. It's what everyone does when the inalienable right to life and a livelihood are violated: they engage in direct action. It is an act of self-respect, an act of solidarity, an act of necessity.

It matters little what changes legislators make to the laws on peaceful protest or how strongly the police enforce those laws. Just Stop Oil supporters understand that this is irrelevant when set against the future that runaway climate breakdown entails.

The government can arrest, fine or incarcerate ordinary people for making their voices heard, or it can take meaningful steps to protect the people of this country by stopping the development of new sources of oil and gas, insulating people's homes and defending the NHS.

This latest clampdown is not going to deter us: if anything, it'll have the opposite effect. We call on everyone to step up and do whatever is nonviolently possible to resist new fossil fuel exploitation in the UK – and the government's slide into authoritarianism.

1. How has the British government reacted to significant direct action from climate activists so far?
2. How does Indigo Rumbelow justify the actions taken by climate activists?
3. To her, what impacts will the government's heavy-handed measures have on climate activism?

² On remand: *en détention provisoire*