

“Act Now, Because it’s Too Late”: **Climate Extremism and the Lessons** **of Extinction Rebellion**

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There are few issues where the billionaire Getty family, Gary Lineker, Michael Gove, and King Charles III all agree on a desired course of action, barring perhaps a preference for inhaling oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide. But wishing to take transformative action to prevent climate change - and to be publicly seen doing so - is one very such issue.

The broad sympathy held by many within the British population to “take action”¹ (as nebulous as this call to arms is) against rising global temperatures has made the study of environmental extremism particularly difficult. Few people will admit to having any sympathy whatsoever for the ideology of misogynistic hatred that leads some men down the radicalised path to inceldom, even if some on occasion enjoy the social media content produced by Andrew Tate. There is an innate understanding that such a view is openly disdained by the vast majority of the population, rebutted to such an extent that for all practical purposes it can only be shared on anonymous internet forums.

But climate change is real: this fact is repeated by our politicians, celebrities, scientific experts, teachers and media outlets. Climate activists are not advocating on behalf of a fringe ideology, but a majority one. As such, the usual identifiers of a path towards radicalisation - millenarian rhetoric, operation within a “cell” structure, a general dissatisfaction with the democratic process and distrust in mainstream politics - applies to such a significant portion of the population as to be nearly meaningless from a policymaking perspective.

But my own experiences have taught me that there is indeed an undercurrent of extremism within the environmentalist movement that, having blossomed at the turn of the decade, now provides fertile ground for future escalations beyond the already challenging, and politically contentious, issues of mass lawbreaking. Balancing the pressing need to uphold civil liberties and effectively cracking down on dangerous behaviour will, in my view, provide the most challenging job for those in the extremism space in the coming years.

Purporting to control the information sphere in the age of social media would be the height of hubris, even in a scenario wherein the United Kingdom embraced the heavy-handed censorship tactics of a nation like China. This practical consideration, alongside the increasing relevance of ideological reasons to veer to the side of free expression rather than pre-emptive meddling, makes me generally much more sympathetic to a light-touch approach.

But this must again be balanced with a need for constant vigilance: some have noted that the clearly escalating illegality of groups like Palestine Action (which extends to an instance of violence against a police officer, who was bludgeoned by a sledgehammer²) is connected to the 2019 wellspring of Extinction Rebellion popularity: Richard Barnard, a co-founder, was

1 <https://www.scientistsforxr.earth/take-action>

2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0mnnje4wlro>

arrested in 2019 for taking part in an Extinction Rebellion action that blocked a DLR commuter train at Canary Wharf³, and was also charged - and later acquitted - in 2020 for spraying pink paint over the headquarters of the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties⁴. The possibility of escalating action in future years, predicated on lessons learned from separate activist circles, is far from improbable, especially given the environmentalist movement's tendency to indulge in accelerationist rhetoric.

For the purposes of clarity, I will use the term "extremist" to delineate between the entirely legal and politicised action of, say, an Extinction Rebellion member engaged in theatrical direct action (dancing in Parliament Square, as opposed to blocking the M11) and anti-system agitators who openly embrace criminal behaviour as a foundation of their platform.

Extreme environmentalists are comparatively open about their anti-system ideology compared to other ideologies that mostly operate "underground", and even the organisation of their illegal activities. Take the case of the five Just Stop Oil activists - Roger Hallam, Daniel Shaw, Louise Lancaster, Lucia Whittaker De Abreu, and Cressida Gethin - who were jailed for a total of 21 years for attempting to blockade the M25⁵, who were so lax about their organisation they accidentally allowed a Sun journalist to infiltrate their call. This suggests a confidence that their organisation would be punished but not excessively - a fair assumption given previous lax enforcement in comparison to other anti-system activist groups and the recent successful appeal to reduce sentences for four of the five activists.

Policymakers will find themselves under a microscope, unable to operate without paying meticulous attention to an ever-shifting media and political landscape that will not grant any benefit of doubt that may be afforded to those monitoring fringe, universally reviled branches of extremism. One taste of what may be to come is shown in the example of when a counter-terror officer mistakenly placed Extinction Rebellion in a twelve page official guide on safeguarding against extremist ideologies⁶. The Guardian received a copy of the report, leading on the line that the environmentalist group was placed alongside far-Right groups. A flurry of media outrage followed that culminated in the officer being let go from his job. To policymakers, it was clear: any association of an environmentalist group that, at that time, still maintained a generally favourable public perception, with the term "extremism" will be taken as an unjustified crackdown on legitimate speech - even if said group's *modus operandi* was purposeful lawbreaking for ideological purposes.

3 <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2021/12/10/jury-acquits-six-for-canary-wharf-train-protest/>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/20/climate-activists-cleared-of-one-charge-after-pink-paint-protest-in-london>

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jul/18/five-just-stop-oil-supporters-jailed-over-protest-that-blocked-m25>

6 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/debates/GetDebateAsText/950168C6-AFDD-4416-9BED-FB30038DC7BE>

Extinction Rebellion, the now-defunct group that dominated headlines just a few short years ago, will form the basis of my examination of the difficulties inherent in the extremism space in balancing free speech. As I will come to discuss, this focus is not coincidental: Extinction Rebellion's founding members would go on to create their own splinter groups, mostly for purposes of further escalation, and may well play a role in future actions. Extinction Rebellion is also the group I have the most personal experience with, having taken part in actions alongside them in 2019 and early 2020. Created by long-standing activists with the underlying belief that previous bodies had failed to enact real change, the group launched a "declaration of rebellion" in parliament square. "We, in alignment with our consciences and our reasoning, declare ourselves in rebellion against our government and the corrupted, inept institutions that threaten our future... the wilful complicity displayed by our Government has shattered meaningful democracy and cast aside the common interest in favour of short-term gain and private profits".

While Extinction Rebellion claimed to operate under a non-hierarchical system (described internally as a "self organising system"⁷ that allowed anyone who agreed with the group's ten principles to create their own networks), two activists provided the bulk of the ideological foundation for the movement's directions: Dr Gail Bradbrook and Roger Hallam, who had worked together in an obscure group called Rising Up!⁸ They spent several years meticulously researching and developing a theory of mass protest movements and civil disobedience. In fact, Hallam had actually written a dissertation on the topic. According to him, Extinction Rebellion was created following a recognition that their previous campaigning over thirty years had failed to achieve political change. Incidentally, Rising Up! proved to be a testing ground for future Extinction Rebellion actions like flying drones over airports, blocking roads, and vandalising the property of fossil fuel developers.⁹

The pair, aside from providing much of the intellectual foundation behind Extinction Rebellion, also happened to be two of the most articulate proponents of its worldview and strategy, with Hallam in particular developing a contentious profile both inside and outside of the group. Nevertheless, others were often put forward to represent the movement and to act as spokespeople. The picture is further blurred by the fact that Extinction Rebellion did not admit to having any formal leadership, but instead presented itself operating under what Gail Bradbrook has described as a "Self Organising System" - a non-hierarchical network that allowed anyone who agreed with the group's ten principles to create their own networks. This method of organisation will be familiar to those who have studied far-Left activist networks in the past, providing activists with a layer of protection from police monitoring and infiltration.

7 <https://activisthandbook.org/organising/sos>

8 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/aug/04/evolution-of-extinction-rebellion-climate-emergency-protest-coronavirus-pandemic>

9 <https://theecologist.org/2017/feb/21/rising-protest-blockades-heathrow-airport>

Climate activists affiliated with Extinction Rebellion or one of its break-off groups are clear that climate change cannot be addressed under the current economic system. Their scepticism didn't stop on the economic level: the leaders of the campaign have repeatedly said that climate change cannot be addressed through the existing democratic process, instead urging law-breaking and an unelected "Citizen's Assembly"¹⁰ as the only solution.

The group's demands are relatively typical of an activist group of this political ideology, varying from the achievable, the achievable but impractical, and the functionally impossible. Extinction Rebellion was unequivocal in stating that it would maintain its campaign of disruption and law-breaking¹¹ until all of its demands had been met. Regardless of whether or not this was a course of action the British government wanted to take, they were essentially "unreasonable". This is hardly grounds in and of itself to claim it is an extremist group: a small charity set up to protect elderly donkeys might make "demands" of the Government that can't possibly be met. No, what set Extinction Rebellion apart was their willingness - frankly, their excitement - to break the law¹².

In building networks of support, early XR members toured the country galvanising activists. Roger Hallam gave one of these outreach talks in late September 2018, with Hallam explaining that the approach involves going into a town hall meeting, and telling the audience that it is "effectively over, we're all going to die unless there's a major mobilisation"¹³. Hallam said that then 30 percent of people agree to be arrested, while between 10 and 20 percent agree to go to prison. This strategy - Hallam and others building on top of already-existing activist groups, as well as ostensibly non-political people who might prove sympathetic like mum's organisations or yoga classes - proved to be extremely successful. By the next month, Hallam was reporting that more than 500 people had signed up to be arrested¹⁴. They succeeded in mobilising large numbers of people for sustained protest, civil disobedience, and law-breaking on a scale not achieved by previous radical protest movements.

This resulted in the serious disruption to large areas of central London for over a week in April 2019 and more sustained disruption across five cities in the UK during July 2019. They caused serious economic and social disruption to the city. The impact of the first week of their protests during April 2019 was estimated to have cost shops £12 million in lost takings and to have delayed 500,000 commuters attempting to travel on London's road and transport system.¹⁵

10 <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/decide-together/citizens-assembly/>

11 <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/about/>

12 <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/act-now/resources/arrestee-welfare/>

13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAH3IQwHKag> , quoted in <https://peacenews.info/node/9236/inaction-not-option>

14 <https://chrishedges.substack.com/p/the-chris-hedges-report-show-with-efe>

15 <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/extremism-rebellion/>

On the evening of 15 April, Extinction Rebellion launched its most significant wave of direct actions occupying five high-profile locations; at Oxford Circus, Parliament Square, Marble Arch, Waterloo Bridge, and Piccadilly Circus. Activists and protesters maintained the spaces for 10 days.

Key to the message of certain environmental activists are the warnings about the cataclysmic effects of climate change on human life on earth. The leading figures in Extinction Rebellion deploy these warnings with particular effect. The recruitment lectures that Roger Hallam and Gail Bradbrook have given across the country have emphasised a message of environmental catastrophe. In these lectures, both Hallam and Bradbrook have encouraged their audiences to engage with their message at an intensely emotional level, even encouraging crying. This apocalyptic vision is visible in the organisation's book, *This Is Not A Drill*, where it is predicted that a majority of the world's societies will have collapsed in ten years time. Hallam is particularly prone to engaging in extremist language¹⁶: "Climate change means economic collapse. That means mass starvation. Many people won't die from lack of food, they'll die from the secondary effects; the slaughter of global war, mass mental breakdown, mass torture, mass rape. You all know this, it's all connected. It's the end. It's over."¹⁷

Bradbrook warned that these were the kinds of conditions that might bring about fascism, telling the audience that World War Two is a reminder of what humans are capable of doing under extreme circumstances.¹⁸ She continued by reading a historical account of the treatment of Soviet Prisoners of War held by Nazi Germany¹⁹, followed by an account of mass rape perpetrated by Soviet soldiers invading Germany. "When society gets into a state of horrendously immoral behaviour, terrible things happen". Hallam echoed a similar message, saying "we are not just sending out e-mails and asking for donations. We are going to force the governments to act. And if they don't, we will bring them down and create a democracy fit for purpose... and yes, some may die in the process".

Extinction Rebellion succeeded in uniting a once-divided environmentalist movement under a single banner, drawing in a new generation of activists in the process. But by the end of the Covid 19 pandemic the group was defunct: torn apart by infighting over tactics and concerns over Hallam's influence. As is common for activist movements of a Left political persuasion, a "splitting" action began, when Hallam set up a flurry of new groups in the space of a few months. Rather than targeting a mass audience and aiming for broad participation, the most infamous of these new groups - Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil - aimed instead to enact

¹⁶ <https://gwern.net/doc/sociology/2019-hallam.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaSkUDnqIFw>

¹⁸ <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/climate-change-extinction-rebellion-food-supply-shortage-riots-fascism-a8963756.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2VkC4SnwY0> (from 18:22)

polarising shock tactics. It was this tactical shift that provided a pathway to more accepted police and legislative monitoring, as will be discussed later, with popular opinion notably swinging behind a restriction of speech and right to assembly.

There was one poster that I always thought summed up well the mindset held by the more hardcore activists - "Act now, because it's too late". There is clearly a difference between recognising the extreme pressure that climate change, if left unchecked, will place on basically every facet of modern life we hold dear, and climate nihilism which, when operating alongside an explicit willingness to break the law, could easily lead well-meaning people down the path of radicalisation and ultimately dangerous behaviour. It is this difference that treads the line of extremism, which, while it is near-impossible to prove a direct cause and effect, can provide a fertile ground for more intense actions on the part of "inspired" activists.

One case study of a radicalised offshoot of a Hallam-founded organisation is a small group called End UK Private Jets. In October 2022, a 21 year old female former medical student poured a bucket of human feces on a memorial to Captain Tom. Addressing the camera, she stated that "everytime a private jet takes off, we pour a bucket of shit and blood on everything Captain Tom stood for".²⁰ The group only had two visible members. Their first action had occurred a month prior, when the male member set himself on fire at Laver Cup²¹ - an obvious escalation into violence against the person. Their 72 minute manifesto, a terrifying vision of the world, was posted on their social media accounts before being taken down for violent imagery (they included uncensored clips of the Rwandan genocide. In it, the activists paint a near future of mass death, torture, rape, and murder bought about by climate change. It echoes, again in a more extreme form, some of the rhetoric employed by Hallam and Bradbrook.

There is also a certain degree of crossover between activists in the environmentalist sphere and the broader far-Left political landscape. One environmental protester I worked alongside at Cambridge Zero Carbon has since redirected the focus of her activism to the Palestinian liberation cause, with a marked increase in willingness to engage in violence as opposed to "merely" illegal actions. This common cause, which has once again united the disparate strands of the extreme environmentalist movement, has provided a fertile opportunity for information sharing and tactical escalation. The activist in question has in the past year been arrested for assaulting a German police officer at a free Palestine march in Berlin and charged for unlawfully disrupting an Elton John concert, on the ostensible grounds that his choice to perform in Tel Aviv in 2016 marks him out as a legitimate target.

20 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/uknews/video-2785661/Video-End-UK-Private-Jets-supporter-pours-faeces-Captain-Toms-memorial.html>

21 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQGxspraXv0>

It is worth investigating further the practical difficulties of enforcing the law when dealing with environmentalist activists given the rapidly changing political environment. Even the slightest perception of “two tier justice” could be ruinous to upholding social cohesion, as Metropolitan Police Chief Mark Rowley’s intense physical response to a journalistic question on the matter in regards to the Southport disturbances would indicate. The core function of the security services, which in this case means the protection of the public from violence and disruption) must come first. Greater sensitivity to suspects’ must be pursued only within the context of a maximally-effective security policy – not at the expense of it.

Environmental activists may find the assertion that they are generally underscrutinised if not underpunished hard to swallow: after-all, the longest ever sentences handed down for peaceful protest were given to Just Stop Oil activists for planning to cause “an unprecedented level of deliberate disruption”. But this followed from years of undersentencing if not outright acquittals in the judicial sphere, with additional discrepancies in policing. There were complaints that police initially “soft-pedaled” XR protests in 2019 (for example, allowing activists to camp in central London for days) in ways they would not with, say, an unauthorised far-Right march. Lax outcomes in jury trials were not isolated to the Shell Six case.²² In another trial, a group of XR activists were acquitted after arguing that their road-block protest was justified by the imminent climate emergency – a case that contributed to calls for clarifying the law to make clear that beliefs cannot justify criminal damage.

Hundreds of thousands of people walking the streets of London every Saturday raised awareness of Palestinian activism without the need for buckets of red paint, hammers, or arm-locks. But criminal damage is clearly the favoured tactic for some activists wishing to raise the profile of their cause quickly. Policymakers felt the need to tighten law to prevent the tactic of deliberate arrests, motivated both by a desire to reduce the strain on police budgets as well as the aforementioned public frustration at alleged unequal treatment of “sympathetic” groups.

This tightening came in March 2024, when the Court of Appeal ruled that “environmental activists accused of criminal damage cannot rely on their political or philosophical beliefs as a defence”²³, with the Attorney General particularly drawing attention to the argument that property owners “would have consented” to the damage if fully aware of the climate crisis. The ruling was met, unsurprisingly, with dismay from the environmentalist community. Just Stop Oil responded by threatening revolution, while the barrister and activist Paul Powlesland criticised the judiciary for “clinging to outdated concepts of causation”.²⁴

22 <https://climatecasechart.com/non-us-case/r-v-bramwell-et-al-the-shell-six-case/#:~:text=On%20April%2023%2C%202021%2C%20a,subsequently%20given%20a%20conditional%20discharge>

23 <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/climate-protesters-cant-rely-beliefs-criminal-damage-cases-uk-court-rules-2024-03-18/>

24 <https://unherd.com/newsroom/just-stop-oil-should-be-judged-in-public-not-by-a-jury/>

Before that, in 2022, Parliament passed the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act, which, among many provisions, expanded police powers to impose conditions on protests in England and Wales. This law made it easier for police to restrict demonstrations that are too noisy or disruptive, a response in part to XR's tactics of occupying public spaces. It too was met with outcry from civil liberties groups who argued it infringed freedom of expression. Even as parts of that Act were being debated, activists continued high-profile stunts, prompting further government action. By 2023, the Government pushed through a dedicated Public Order Act, explicitly targeting protest tactics used by climate activists.

This new law created offenses such as “locking on” (attaching oneself to objects or people to cause disruption), “tunneling” (as some HS2 rail project protesters did), and introduced Serious Disruption Prevention Orders (SDPOs) which can restrict individuals from protesting even if they have not been convicted of a crime, akin to protester injunctions. The Act also increased penalties for motorway obstruction and allowed police to stop and search people for protest-related items. The backlash to these legal changes was sharp and immediate, with critics arguing that they undermined rights to free assembly.

The relationship between Governments and environmental activist groups in the post-Extinction Rebellion landscape has often been strained. Climate activists do not face ideological criminalisation: nobody will be arrested for having been a member of XR on the basis of association alone, nor is it illegal to communicate views sympathetic to a radical activist viewpoint. Indeed, as previously mentioned, some political figures demonstrated public solidarity with Extinction Rebellion, and the Government declared a climate emergency in line with activist demands. A push-and-pull reactive response is likely to continue in the coming years.

Still, the legal changes of 2022 and 2023 may not be the end. If activists develop new tactics, new offenses will likely be drafted in response, especially if there is broad public consent for doing so. For instance, if climate activists moved to more covert or sabotage-oriented methods (say, targeting pipelines or infrastructure in a dangerous way), one could imagine terrorism laws being amended to explicitly cover “eco-terrorism.” We already have a robust framework targeting extremist ideology: for example, it's a crime to incite racial or religious hatred, and membership in certain organisations (like the neo-Nazi group National Action, banned in 2016) is illegal. Someone organising for a banned far-Right group or disseminating Islamist terrorist propaganda can face long prison terms under terrorism statutes – penalties much harsher than those for non-violent protest. Enacting such a change prior to concrete evidence of a violent escalation would be misguided. There is also some likelihood that a group of parliamentarians who feel the current wording of the Public Order Act is overly harsh may seek to repeal it outright or soften it through amendments.

The judicial system has perhaps been more successful in responding in a flexible manner to the changing threat of environmental activist in recent years, shying away from the utilisation of terrorist designations but correctly applying public order offence law where appropriate. Still, there have been some missteps that provided explicitly law-breaking groups with recruitment propaganda, as in *R v Bramwell et al* (the “Shell Six” case) where the trial judge remarked that he sympathised with the defendant’s motives. Indeed, this case reveals a great deal of the complexity inherent in prosecuting climate-motivated law breaking, with the jury refusing to convict against the direction of the judge, which in turn provoked an intervention to prevent future outcomes by the Attorney General.

Legacy media representation of environmental activism runs the gamut from heroic to criminal. This framing, in turn, influences the political narrative and potentially the legal response. Importantly, because climate activism resonates with a significant portion of the public, it tends to receive more nuanced and less universally hostile media treatment than extremist movements like violent white nationalism or Islamism – which are almost never portrayed in a positive light by responsible outlets. That commentary about climate activism is legitimate speech is almost universally accepted, in spite of the violent, dark, anti-system content publicly available on the blogs of public figures like Roger Hallam²⁵.

It is impossible to predict the future. But when that future concerns the possibility of extremist organising under the banner of environmentalism, there are some clear markers to watch as closely as possible for as an early warning system. This theoretical future extremist group’s rhetoric will be just as heightened as it was in groups like Extinction Rebellion, with visions of an apocalyptic future looming, but named individuals - be they politicians or workers in the energy industry - will be the target as opposed to more abstract institutions like capitalism or the British parliamentary system. There will be clear lines of comparison in the accelerationist ideology between other, better understood and studied extremist movements. Tactics will be designed to shock and appall, rather than excite or even mildly irritate. The majority of people will be repulsed by the tactics. It won’t achieve their aims. But it will draw in the most fanatical and most determined activists into the sect, driving a feedback loop. Policymakers must always believe in the question activists may ask themselves: if you truly believed the end of the world was coming, how far would you go?

Striking a balance in these circumstances in responding to novel protest tactics at the outer limits of tolerance and safeguarding freedom of speech and the right to protest will be vital. The legal system has proven itself highly responsive to the abuse of peaceful assembly rules, and it falls upon politicians to act in a way they deem appropriate to set the limits of this

²⁵ <https://rogerhallam.com/>

assembly. But vigilance should be shown through a scalpel approach, not a sledgehammer. A heavy-handed response may only achieve negative results as a ready-made tool of activist radicalisation. While I strongly believe that the conditions for a serious, violent environmental extremist group are here, acting prematurely will not achieve the aims of the Home Office counter extremism unit. Understanding the ideological foundations of green groups, monitoring inter-activist networks, and striving for equal, unbiased treatment will be paramount in the years to come.

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