

SOURCE A

The middle-class eco rabble who want to kill off free speech: Extinction Rebellion activists moan their climate change doomsday message isn't being printed on newspaper front pages EVERY DAY...as they block access to national presses

By MAX AITCHISON and JONATHAN BUCKS and PETER HENN FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY.
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They were taking drastic action, they gravely insisted, because their doomsday message on climate change was not being printed on newspaper front pages every day.

That's right, every day. That such a heavy-handed demand was so wildly incompatible with freedom of expression, something they profess to cherish, seemed lost on the Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists yesterday.

Blockading access to national presses, thereby preventing newspaper distribution, was not exactly the most democratic of actions either. It was an irony that the ragtag army of mostly middle-class protesters who laid siege to presses at Broxbourne in Hertfordshire, Knowsley in Merseyside, and Motherwell in North Lanarkshire failed to grasp.

When they weren't chained to bamboo frames blocking the road, the protesters were delivering eye-crossingly monotonous diatribes to reporters. Typical of the activists was Gully Bujak, frogmarched from the Broxbourne blockade just off the M25 by police after sprawling on a blow-up mattress atop a van.

The 27-year-old's previous battle honours include being arrested at a protest last April after sitting in a pink boat blocking the middle of Oxford Circus. On that occasion she said the police were 'polite and considerate' but that, she mused, was only because of her 'position of privilege as a white middle-class woman'.

Tired and grumpy, the police seemed markedly less accommodating in the small hours of yesterday. A senior officer instructed his staff that two officers were required per arrest. 'This is a public nuisance offence and these protesters are preventing the distribution of four major national newspapers tomorrow,' he said.

As she was led away, Ms Bujak, an 'actress, model and extra' gushed about her 'extraordinary' fellow protesters as if they were the cast members in a hit West End show.

Then she got serious and intoned: 'The climate emergency is an existential threat to humanity. Instead of publishing this on the front page every day as it deserves, much of our media ignores the issue and some actively sow seeds of climate denial.'

By midnight in Broxbourne, around 30 Hertfordshire police officers had formed a cordon around 300 yards from where the 60 or so protesters had blocked the road.

A steady stream of confused workers turned up at the printworks, many having parked on the motorway verge because they couldn't access the car park. A frazzled manager stood at the cordon in heated conversation with officers. But as the night wore on, hundreds more officers arrived on the scene. By 1am, the quiet corner of Hertfordshire was a sea of blue lights and police officers from five different forces and more than 50 vehicles.

A handful of Extinction Rebellion loyalists stood outside the cordon filming the scene and co-ordinating with protesters blocking the road. At 2.30am, around 30 black-clad officers gathered in the nondescript business park, seemingly discussing tactics.

One XR member filming the scene gestured towards the police and muttered: 'Here we go then' before they stopped filming and scarpered. Guests at the neighbouring Travelodge, clearly awoken by the ceaseless sirens, poked their heads out the windows.

Four black vans were let through the cordon and parked up as protesters began singing the Star Wars film tune that is used to mark Darth Vader's entrance.

They brandished dozens of black boxes containing drills and chainsaws which they then used to cut through the locks and chains the protesters had used. Enormous floodlights were used.

For several hours, sparks flew and the sound of chainsaws could be heard against the backdrop of XR's music and chants of 'Extinction Rebellion'. By 5.30am, officers had arrested eight protesters – each arrest greeted with a cheer from other protesters.

The group had sent out instructions for 'rebels' at home, which included going to local newsagents and 'explaining to potential newspaper buyers why their newspaper is not on the shelves'. XR's ambition to target printing plants was revealed by the Mail on Sunday in December. A plan called The Great March for Truth & Blockade, was pitched to XR's 'Action Circle' that month. The proposal identified the Broxbourne site as 'very vulnerable to a mass blockade'.

One of the co-authors of the report, Donnachadh McCarthy, a career activist, was at yesterday's blockade. He said he was taking part because the Government was 'taking sides with the enemies of Britain', adding: 'We feel that there's silence from the media and Government on climate change. We've faced the Coronavirus crisis, but rather than use it to create a new, green, economy, the Government has given quantitative easing money and Covid loans to people like the aviation industry,' he said.

Other protesters at Broxbourne included Matthew Hammond, 51, a maths tutor, who once declared on an XR march in his home city: 'We pace the walls as if they were the walls of Jericho, to be broken asunder, to let the change and new world in.' He posted a long poem about his experience yesterday.

Another activist, Tim Speers, was arrested last year while filming himself spray-painting the slogan 'animal emergency = crime against humanity' on London's Old Bailey.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said a free press was 'vital' in holding the Government to account and 'it is completely unacceptable to seek to limit the public's access to news in this way'. Last night, police confirmed they had arrested 80 people across all three sites.

SOURCE B

‘I’ll continue to fight’: the prosecuted Extinction Rebellion protesters

Matthew Taylor for The Guardian, Thursday 29 Apr 2021

Environment protest being criminalised around world, say experts

Just after 10am on a bright and sunny Monday in April 2019, hundreds of people stepped off the pavement and on to the road on Waterloo Bridge in London.

Within a few minutes, one of the main crossings over the River Thames was full of people, tents were erected, banners unfurled, mobile kitchens opened and trees in planters dragged into the carriageway.

Extinction Rebellion (XR) – which had launched a few months earlier to sound the alarm about the climate crisis – had arrived.

In the coming days thousands of people took part in a 10-day blockade of key sites across central London. The April “rebellion” was the start of the biggest civil disobedience campaign seen in the UK for generations and it was followed by two more major demonstrations as well as scores of other smaller protests targeting “bad actors” in the system, from fossil fuel firms to the printing presses of rightwing newspapers.

The wave of civil disobedience helped transform the way the climate crisis is discussed and led to climate emergency declarations by parliament and scores of councils around the UK.

But it was also met with a growing chorus of criticism from rightwing commentators and an increasingly harsh backlash from the state. The latest figures show that since 2019 more than 3,500 people taking part in XR protests have been arrested, almost all for minor public order offences such as obstructing the highway.

And away from the glare of the media, more than 2,000 have been prosecuted and taken to court.

From husbands and wives arrested together to first-time protesters, climate scientists to grandparents – their stories shine a light on how XR became one of the most significant protest movements in the UK in recent years and the wider fight for climate justice.

To the surprise of some observers, many of the people who took to the streets in April 2019 were not young, or long-term environmentalists. Instead the ranks of the first wave of XR activists were awash with “respectable” older people – often retirees and grandparents.

Stephanie Howlett, 69, a retired NHS psychotherapist and former probation officer from Sheffield, was arrested at Parliament Square in London during the April 2019 protests as she sat in the road singing. She received a six-month conditional discharge and was ordered to pay £105 costs.

“I didn’t want to do this and found it hard knowing that our actions in April were causing disruption and inconvenience to many people’s lives,” she told the court in her written statement. “But I felt impelled to act in the face of the catastrophic future I saw unfolding before us all.”

She said that since her daughter became pregnant with her first grandchild, “delight at this news has been overshadowed by fear of what kind of world this new little being will grow up in. I decided that I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do everything I could to avoid what was looking like a sleepwalk to disaster, leaving a planet unfit to live on for all future generations.”

Some of those who ended up in court had been involved in the environmental movement for years and a few had been arrested before. But for most this was their first brush with the law – and in some cases their first protest.

Several had been working on the climate crisis for years either as scientists, researchers or campaigners. But their testimony shows they had grown exasperated that, after years of signing petitions, going on protests and writing to their MPs, nothing had changed.

James Ryle, 53, a university project manager from Bristol, had worked on environmental issues for a quarter of a century – from a conservation volunteer to “sustainability adviser” to corporations, governments and the United Nations.

But he told the court: “I’ve become increasingly despairing at the lack of meaningful government action to address climate change. The truth is, nothing has changed and so things have just got worse.”

He said the manmade catastrophes happening now were causing “untold human misery and loss” and were also a warning “of much, much worse to come” if only people would listen.

Ryle said he had no intention of getting arrested when he joined the XR protests, planning instead to “help with outreach to members of the public”.

He added: “But on Good Friday afternoon – sitting in front of the pink boat listening to moving testimonies from climate refugees, mothers, nurses and young people living in fear for their futures – something different happened,” he said. “I felt suddenly and deeply the exquisite vulnerability connecting me with the millions around the world already suffering as a result of climate breakdown ... In that moment of clarity, I realised I had no other choice but to break the law.”

Ryle was given a six-month conditional discharge and £105 costs.

There are still more than 1,000 prosecutions progressing through the courts, although there is growing pressure on the government from civil rights groups and climate scientists not to waste time and money prosecuting peaceful climate protesters in the midst of an ecological emergency.

Zoë Blackler from XR said that whatever the government did to crack down on legitimate protest – most recently in its controversial crime and policing bill – the determination of ordinary people to make their voice heard and to demand urgent, far-reaching action on climate justice would not be denied.

“What we’ve learned from this unique moment in British legal history is that ordinary people will act in extraordinary ways, to make their voices heard and demand the urgent, systemic changes needed to safeguard all our futures.”