

Time to Rebel: Civil Disobedience for the Planet

An interview with Jayne Forbes

July 10, 2019

The Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement has grabbed headlines since late 2018 with its repertoire of non-violent but disruptive tactics to raise climate awareness and protest government inaction on impending ecological collapse. The UK-born phenomenon has transformed into an international movement which continues to gather momentum. We spoke to XR activist Jayne Forbes on her experiences in the London blockades and citizen's assemblies as well as the wider movement's demands and strategy.

Green European Journal: Extinction Rebellion first emerged in late 2018. Can you talk us through the first few months of the movement?

Jayne Forbes: Extinction Rebellion first publicly declared an emergency on October 31 last year, announcing a campaign of civil disobedience and subsequently locked down London by closing five bridges. A lot of people had been waiting for something like this to happen because the old system of trying to engage with the government to effect change was just not working. In the months that followed, the actions continued. Just before Christmas, Extinction Rebellion targeted and shut down London BBC studios and demonstrated outside those studios in London, Bristol, Glasgow, Sheffield, and Birmingham to demand that they tell the truth. The BBC had been saying very little about climate change and, as a public service broadcaster, we feel that it is its job to inform the population about the urgency of the situation. In February, we ran 'Teach the Truth' actions to get teachers on board and focus on education. And throughout, we have been supporting the inspirational Strike for Climate marches by secondary school pupils.

What happened in April 2019 when the rebellion made international headlines with its actions in London?

The rebellion is ongoing and, while it not only focused on London, we did concentrate on the capital in April as that is where you can get the attention of the media and politicians. The rebellion phase began on April 15 and lasted 11 days. On the first day, five entrances to London, major arterial junctions, were blocked and occupations were set up. Each occupation was designed around a different aspect of our movement: Marble Arch was "It's an emergency"; Oxford Circus was "Tell the truth" (that was the junction blocked with the pink boat that became an iconic symbol); Waterloo was "Act on it"; and at Parliament Square was "Beyond Politics". Piccadilly Circus was also held for a couple of days by Extinction Rebellion Youth.

During that action the streets were blocked for ten days and over one thousand people were peacefully arrested. The sites were wonderful spaces to be in – there was singing, dancing, talks, citizens assemblies, lots of new people became rebels. The police and the state did not know how to react to us: the police were nonplussed by people willingly being arrested, while the state was unsure about being heavy handed and risking a backlash if the public witnessed a tough response to the peaceful protestors.

Some media reported that Londoners were unhappy with the blockages as they could not get to work on time, and some West End traders supposedly lost some income. However, many people enjoyed being able to walk around

the car-free spaces that were created, levels of air pollution fell, and many people working nearby joined us for a few hours on their way home from work – some even stayed days.

The main purpose had been to raise awareness of the issues, and this objective was highly successful. There was enormous media coverage during the International Rebellion, in which overseas groups of Extinction Rebellion also staged protests in their countries. This resulted in us meeting with various government representatives, and the UK government has since declared a climate emergency. Now we need them to act on it.

What are the demands of Extinction Rebellion?

Our demands are clear and straightforward. The first is for the government and the media to tell the truth about climate change and the ecological emergency. The second demand is that the government acts now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025. The third demand is that the government must create and be led by the decisions of a citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice.

Many people have been arrested as part of Extinction Rebellion protests. Is that part of your strategy?

The concept of arrest is important because it shows the government that people, lots of people, are prepared to sacrifice themselves for the cause. After all, their future is being sacrificed anyway, so what is getting arrested and being locked up overnight? Over 1000 people were arrested – myself included – which is when action turns into rebellion and also when you receive press coverage. In my experience, the police behavior was excellent. Most people were held for up to 24 hours and released under investigation. It is unclear whether and how people will be charged, however a number are being charged with obstructing the highway. They are pleading not guilty as they were doing it for the greater good.[1]

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The public and the press, apart from one or two dinosaurs, have been very supportive. Our actions have sparked a real discussion about climate change and the ecological disaster. The rebellion was designed this way precisely to get the media to “tell the truth”, as set out in our demands. The two weeks of rebellion were fantastic: hundreds of volunteers involved, well organised, co-partisan, and nobody got hurt.

Where does Extinction Rebellion's strategy come from?

It is based on the experiences of movements that have won change, such as Gandhi's movement for Indian independence and the civil rights campaign in the southern United States. One of the Extinction Rebellion co-founders studied the way social change is successfully effected through civil movements, and one of the most successful tactics is non-violence. It only takes 3.5 per cent of the population to mobilise to start a change and shape the agenda. So mass mobilisation is required, but it does not mean everyone has to engage in the issue. We're reaching out across the population: thousands of people have been on the streets, we have over 126 000 people signed up to XR internationally, of whom just under 90 000 are from the UK. Massive numbers are joining us every day.

Where does Extinction Rebellion stand in relation to politics and parties?

Our catch phrase is “beyond politics”. Extinction Rebellion is not here to engage in politics but to push politics into

the direction that it needs to go in. We are not here to create policies as we are not the experts and scientists who know how to solve these problems. The government needs to introduce policies that will begin to work, and this process should involve citizen's assemblies.

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What has been the role of citizen's assemblies so far and how will this evolve as the rebellion continues?

During the two weeks of rebellion in London, people's assemblies were organised for immediate decision-making on the ground. The assemblies would make plans and decide practical questions such as whether to break up a particular camp if the police come. Within the wider XR movement, people are organising smaller assemblies, giving people a chance to do politics and be involved in some form of decision-making. We look to the Irish model, which for example held a [citizen's assembly to investigate views on the law on abortion](#), which was changed in line with the assembly's views with the referendum result. Extinction Rebellion wants to ensure democracy and that the people are heard. Usually when you bring people together to take a decision based on unprejudiced facts, they come up with a well thought through, relevant answer.

In the United Kingdom, many local councils have declared a climate emergency, and on May 1 2019 the Westminster Parliament did too. What is meant by "climate emergency"?

Climate emergency states the intention, whether from a council or the government as a whole, to have net zero greenhouse gas emissions by a set date. Most councils have set the date for 2030, while the government is looking at 2050. That is too late – the planet will be well on the way to dying and civilisation will have disappeared with only the rich surviving. We are asking for 2025. We need an early date as this is an emergency and needs addressing now. It is time to turn statements into policies.

When it comes to turning the tide of climate and biodiversity crisis, how much does Extinction Rebellion think can be achieved by legal changes through the political system?

Using the political system has been tried for decades and has demonstrably failed, therefore we have to turn to civil disobedience.

Legal changes are part of the solution, however. The government needs to enact laws that provide organisations with a context for their decision-making. For example, that all commercial companies need to include a climate risk assessment in their annual report and demonstrate how they are responding to ecological challenges. All organisations must be obliged to have a plan, particularly energy providers, for net zero emissions. A new system of agriculture needs to be introduced, reforestation and rewilding need to take place... the list goes on.

The government needs to legislate to fund the climate and ecological emergency, and there should be a ministerial department with power and funding sufficient to address the issues – maybe even set up a COBRA-style crisis management body.[2] The government needs to demonstrate to the public that this is an emergency, otherwise the public are unlikely to accept the need for change. And this must be a consensus government, with decisions led by a citizens' assembly; it is too late to take a party-political view.

Getting out of a climate and ecological emergency is going to require radical action, do you think governments and wider society are ready?

There are some easy wins open for the UK government: it could halt all fracking and stop the development of the third runway at Heathrow, for example. Then there are harder but necessary steps that need to be considered: totally changing the agriculture system, challenging the throwaway culture, reducing private transport, taxing aircraft fuel, insulating homes, and changing our diets.

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and will be out there making it happen.*

When considering these dilemmas, we need to think of the future. The future is set to be a lot worse than the present if action is not taken. And for some people, the future is *now*. People are dying from the heatwaves in Europe every summer. In the UK, people are losing their homes to coastal erosion and flooding. In Africa and India, food production is falling due to increasing heat, droughts and floods. In the U.S., there are floods and wildfires, and in Australia there are heatwaves which last weeks. These are the realities. It is happening now and I am not sure people are aware of it.

What can we expect from Extinction Rebellion in near future?

We will see what comes out of our meetings with politicians. We have met Sadiq Kahn, the mayor of London, John McDonnell, the shadow chancellor, and Michael Gove, minister for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We're hoping that they really listen to what we have to say and begin to act now by creating and implementing emergency plans for the economy.

Of course, Extinction Rebellion actions are ongoing. In late April 2019 we organised protests outside the Brazilian embassy in London to highlight the destruction of the rainforest, while we targeted financial institutions in London's banking district with swarm protests. There have been a number of actions tackling fossil fuel organisations. The intense activity of April left people at once tired and energised. There is much more to do. This government is not suddenly going to start talking about the climate emergency and implementing policies to deal with it. Not only it is too busy with Brexit, but it still defends fracking as good for the climate. There is a long way to go. Extinction Rebellion knows that and will be out there making it happen.

[1] Update: as of May 2019, the Metropolitan Police is seeking to [bring charges against over 1000 Extinction Rebellion protestors](#) . An [initial court case](#) found one protestor, who pleaded innocent on the grounds that the disruption was minimal compared to that which may be caused by climate change, guilty of a minor public order offence.

[2] COBRA refers to the UK governmental practice of calling cross-departmental emergency councils which meet to discuss government response in times of crisis.



Jayne Forbes joined the [Extinction Rebellion](#) in November 2018. Formerly a senior lecturer at the University of the Arts, London, for nearly 30 years, she has been a Green Party candidate for local, London, national and European elections and was party chair for two years.

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