

Henry Mance, 9th Dec 2022 - Financial Times article.

Can Just Stop Oil make the case for protest?

The climate activists know their tactics make people angry — and they believe that's a price worth paying.

On July 17 1914, Margaret Gibb, a Scottish woman in her thirties, walked into London's National Portrait Gallery and started looking at the paintings. She took out a butcher's cleaver from her dress and smashed the glass on a portrait of the historian Thomas Carlyle. She then cut her knife through the canvas at least three times, leaving scars through Carlyle's forehead and left ear.

Gibb was arrested following a "severe struggle" and gave the police a false name. Newspapers ridiculed her. After a short trial, during which she claimed that the painting would have "added value" because of her actions, she was sentenced to six months in jail. She was released within days, because, like many suffragettes, she started a hunger strike that left the authorities with no good options.

Four years later, Britain's parliament granted some women the vote. The National Portrait Gallery now celebrates the suffragettes. As Gibb predicted, the patched-up portrait of Carlyle has added historical value.

Will history be as kind to climate protesters? In July, two young activists from the group Just Stop Oil glued themselves to the frame of a John Constable painting in London's National Gallery. In October, two other activists threw cans of Heinz tomato soup at Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" and glued their hands to the wall. "Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people?" asked one of them, Phoebe Plummer. Similar acts have taken place at art galleries in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and Australia.

What's striking is that the protesters' tactics are milder than those used by the suffragettes. They have not damaged any artwork. (The National Gallery's version of "Sunflowers" — there are four similar ones in other museums — was protected by glass; the gallery reported only "some minor damage to the frame".)

Nor have Just Stop Oil protesters resisted arrest or given false names. Yes, they have disrupted Britain's roads and airports. They have smashed some petrol pumps and sprayed "No New Oil and Gas" in orange paint on the stone facade of the Bank of England. But that pales next to the suffragettes, who broke shop windows en masse, cut telephone and telegraph wires, and set fire to post boxes. It pales, too, next to what Swedish academic Andreas Malm proposed in his book *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. Why are we so shocked?

Like the suffragettes before them, climate protesters are not loved. British voters oppose Just Stop Oil's actions by a margin of 64 to 21, one YouGov poll has found. Labour party leader Keir Starmer has called for protesters to be given longer prison sentences. The UK government is pushing through new police powers, including the ability to break up protests that stop fuel deliveries or cause significant noise. On a visit to London, American economist Tyler Cowen told me that the protesters should be jailed for "three to five years" for endangering works of art.

Some of this hostility may be based on false impressions. Many people assumed that Just Stop Oil ruined a Van Gogh masterpiece. "They've absolutely lost me. Forever," tweeted the broadcaster and art lover Andrew Marr, on seeing a viral video of the stunt.

Another misunderstanding is that Just Stop Oil wants to stop oil use now, as its name suggests. The group emerged in February, made up largely of veterans of other climate protest organisations, Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain. It claims to be "non-hierarchical", but its non-violent stunts rely on a committed, coordinated hardcore. Its funders include the Climate Emergency Fund, a non-profit backed by oil heiress Aileen Getty.

Just Stop Oil's demand is simply that the UK end all new fossil fuel licences. This fits with the International Energy Agency's call for "no new investments in oil, gas and coal". It sends a backwards message for the UK, the world's first industrialised country, to exploit new fossil fuel reserves when global CO₂ emissions are still rising. A year ago, at Glasgow's COP26 summit, it pushed the world to phase out coal. Yet this week it approved a new coal mine. It is also pressing ahead with a new round of licences in the North Sea, which will probably take several years to start yielding gas, so won't alleviate the current squeeze.

The argument over Just Stop Oil is an argument over how change happens. Our society loves civil disobedience — as long as it happens in the past or somewhere else. Two-thirds of Britons said in a poll that they would support "non-violent direct action to protect the UK's nature". But support diminishes in practice. My Twitter feed is filled with users who lionise protesters in Iran and Hong Kong but drip with condescension for climate protesters in Europe. Many people reject the disruption to everyday life. They ask why climate activists don't instead canvass for the Green party.

52% Proportion of Britons favour an earlier date for reaching net zero emissions.

This week the prosecutor in the trial of the Constable protesters drew a line between Just Stop Oil and the suffragettes. "The suffragettes had no democratic means by which they could further their cause . . . We have an established democracy." He suggested too that if the summer heatwave hadn't raised awareness about climate change, the protesters' actions "were never going to make a difference". The protesters were duly found guilty.

Perhaps civil disobedience does lose its rationale when those practising it have the right to vote? Or perhaps changing the system — even in democracies — is messier and more involved than we have come to imagine?

In mid-November, I met Indigo Rumbelow, a 28-year-old Just Stop Oil spokesperson, in a café near St Paul's Cathedral. Her unusual name is a red rag to those who assume climate activists to be posh and privileged. MailOnline described her as "the globe-trotting farmer's daughter who lectures the public on saving the planet". It published a correction when she pointed out that her father is a retired builder and her mother is a teacher. "I went to a state school in Swansea," she told me, affronted. Just Stop Oil's protesters have included priests, engineers, doctors and stay-at-home mothers. In October and November, the police made 755 arrests.

Rumbelow offered various defences for this "civil resistance". But her most intriguing argument was that the public already agreed with Just Stop Oil: "People want to see action. It's just that the governments aren't acting."

This may well be right. In 2021, polls found that a plurality of Britons supported bans on new coal mines and new oil and gas exploration. Even during the energy crisis, polls have suggested low support for shale gas fracking and high support for renewables. A majority — 52 per cent — of British voters say that the government should bring forward its target of being net zero by 2050.

Do politicians reflect popular opinion? Political scientists have studied this question and their conclusions are broadly reassuring. Devin Caughey and Chris Warshaw, associate professors at MIT and George Washington University respectively, found that US state legislatures did reflect the average voter's opinions. A paper in the European Journal of Political Research found something similar in 31 European countries. Different electoral systems matter much less than you might imagine.

But there are caveats. When public views shift, politicians often take decades to catch up. In the short term, the probability that a state policy matches public opinion is "not much better than chance", Caughey and Warshaw found.

What's more, on certain issues, a highly motivated minority can sway policy away from the views of the average voter. More than 90 per cent of Americans support universal background checks for gun owners, but they are thwarted by the gun lobby. And politicians are less likely to follow public opinion if the issue is not salient — if it's not a priority. Democracy isn't just about what the public feels, it's about how strongly it feels it.

People may 'shoot the messenger' but they do — at least sometimes — hear the message.

Colin Davis, University of Bristol

When it comes to climate action, these caveats are major problems. It's not good enough for politicians to align with public opinion in a few decades' time: emissions need to fall now. "If it wasn't a very small timeframe, we could look at policy change through conventional routes," Rumbelow told me. A highly motivated minority opposition does exist: fossil fuel companies whose lobbying often goes against public opinion. And the issue is not salient: climate policy struggles for the type of media attention that immigration, for example, receives.

We think of elections as the pinnacle of democracy. The focus on opinion polls strengthens that assumption. But electoral democracy does not always deliver what people want. Arguably, it is not delivering the climate policy that people want.

There is an alternative. The ancient Greeks had elections for certain roles. But they placed more weight on choosing representatives by lottery. This was seen as fairer and less liable to manipulation. "The appointment of magistrates by lot is thought to be democratic, and the election of them oligarchic," wrote Aristotle.

Extinction Rebellion, the spiritual parent of Just Stop Oil, harks back to this tradition. It wants a citizens' climate assembly whose members would be chosen randomly from the adult population, and would then deliberate on climate policies, which the UK parliament could then discuss. The idea is not to replace electoral democracy, but to supplement it.

The House of Commons did organise a citizens' assembly in 2020. A group of 108 people heard expert evidence, then deliberated on how the UK should reach net zero. They came down in favour of policies such as a ban on gas boilers and a frequent-flyer tax that increased the more often people flew. They rejected the use of fossil fuels with carbon capture and storage (the technology proposed by the government for the new Cumbrian coal mine). It showed that when citizens pause to think about climate, they are more radical than their politicians. But the assembly's conclusions were ignored.

In the absence of such democracy by lottery, Just Stop Oil's strategy is to make oil and gas into front-page news. "We're trying to polarise the public so we can bring this debate to the fore," said Rumbelow. The group doesn't mind being hated: it argues that if it forces people to think about the issue, they will come down on its side.

This can involve "collateral damage". One man delayed on the M25 motorway said that he missed his father's funeral. There have been reports — often vague — of ambulances being delayed. A police officer was injured in a motorbike crash while attending to a roadblock.

25% Suggested proportion of a country's population needed to generate social change.

Even sympathetic voices, such as LGBT rights activist Peter Tatchell, have said Just Stop Oil should focus its protests on fossil fuel infrastructure. The group has tried that. It dug tunnels to block traffic to fuel terminals, causing many petrol pumps in England to run dry. It organised demonstrations outside Kingsbury Oil Terminal, the UK's largest inland oil storage centre. The problem is that no one paid much attention.

As I pressed Rumbelow on these strategic questions, her tone became almost messianic. “I just really hope all your readers have read the latest IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] report,” she said. “Just don’t make it all about tactics. Try to get in touch, almost philosophically or morally, with how important this moment in time is.”

Does it work? Last month, as I walked past roadblocks of Just Stop Oil activists surrounded by police vans, and watched videos of angry drivers dragging them off the tarmac, I had my doubts.

But climate activists have a decent record. When Extinction Rebellion began protesting in Britain in 2018, none of the major political parties had committed to net zero. In June 2019, Theresa May committed the UK to net zero — albeit by 2050, rather than 2025, as Extinction Rebellion wanted. Net zero has been political consensus ever since. After Insulate Britain blocked roads in 2021, mentions of insulation in UK newspapers more than doubled.

Colin Davis, a professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Bristol, has run experiments to understand how people feel about disruptive protesters. He concludes: “There isn’t any compelling evidence for non-violent protest being counterproductive. People may ‘shoot the messenger’, but they do — at least, sometimes — hear the message.”

"I love that people are fighting for the planet and we need more people like them" - Lewis Hamilton.

Extinction Rebellion wants a bigger victory. Initially, its activists cited the theory that no revolution had failed when 3.5 per cent of the population turned out in a mass demonstration. (This threshold is equivalent to about 2mn adults in the UK.)

The “3.5 per cent rule” was drawn from work by Harvard professor Erica Chenoweth on the overthrow of dictators. Its application to climate protests in modern democracies was a stretch. Chenoweth herself offers a more nuanced blueprint, suggesting that social change may require a committed minority of perhaps 25 per cent of the population. The climate movement “needs to massively expand its membership”, she argues.

Just Stop Oil is trying to create that mass movement. After it disrupted the British Grand Prix in July, racing driver Lewis Hamilton offered his support: “I love that people are fighting for the planet and we need more people like them.”

“We were so happy,” recalled Rumbelow. “We were like, ‘This is it! Key cultural figures are going to come onside, and we’re going to build this movement to hundreds of thousands of people, and then we’ll just need to sit in Parliament Square.’ But our numbers are still quite small.”

Protest movements can multiply almost overnight. They can also backfire or provoke a backlash — in the way that Occupy Wall Street arguably did. The UK’s new protest laws would in effect block certain people from attending protests, even if they have never been convicted of any offence.

One activist told me he relished the government’s intransigence: when the public saw that politicians were refusing to take reasonable steps, such as stopping new oil licences, they would become convinced of the need for systemic change. But he also worried about the effect of arrests and prison, that those punished would be put off activism for life.

The activists I met did not regret their actions. “I believe we achieved our aim,” Hannah Hunt, who glued herself to the Constable painting, told her trial. She said that she had tried writing to her MP, going on marches, becoming vegan and stopping flying. “Did any of those actions get you the front page of a national newspaper?” she was asked. “No,” she replied. She and fellow protester Eben Lazarus were fined £1,081.48, but avoided prison.

Marcus, 33, is already in prison, even though he hasn't been found guilty. He scaled the Dartford Crossing in October with another activist. He spent 36 hours suspended 80 metres above the bridge, including a night sleeping peacefully in a hammock. "Later on, from my solicitor, I found out that someone had shot fireworks at us. I wasn't even aware." He negotiated his surrender to the police, "so nobody got hurt". All in all, "It was an extreme thing to do, and I would much rather not do extreme things if there was another way," he told me, by phone from HMP Chelmsford.

Marcus had known he risked prison — "a week or two was on my radar". Reality was worse: he wasn't granted bail while awaiting trial, even though the UK's prisons are nearly full. He is likely to spend at least five months in prison, away from his partner and her two children, before facing a jury. "I'm feeling quite OK," he told me. He is keeping fit and educating his fellow inmates about climate and biodiversity. "A majority of people, they are interested, they are receptive. That includes prison guards." Juries have acquitted some climate protesters, just as they acquitted the protesters who toppled the statue of slave-trader Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020. "We know the people are on our side," Marcus said.

"You win some, you glue some" — Robert Shrimpsley in 2019 on how Extinction Rebellion got stuck.

So there is a democratic impasse. Just Stop Oil advocates a policy that the public wants (stronger climate action), through means that the public finds uncomfortable. The UK government pursues a policy that the public doesn't want, through means (an oil licensing round) that the public barely notices.

Historians debate how much if at all, the suffragettes accelerated women's suffrage. They will debate similarly about Just Stop Oil and whatever protest group succeeds it. But to those who argue that there are better, less disruptive tactics to bring climate policy into line with what the public wants, the challenge is simple: what are those tactics? And which of us is daring to carry them out?

Henry Mance is the FT's chief features writer.

Copyright

The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.

[Reuse this content \(opens in new window\)](#)