

EXTINCTION REBELLION - SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

By Mark Ward

Last week I found myself in London on Saturday 17th November at the same time as the new Extinction Rebellion movement occupied bridges across the Thames for 5 hours. I missed the start of the occupation, when at 10am 1,000s of people simultaneously stepped into the road on each of five central London bridges, but I later joined the protestors on Westminster Bridge and stayed with them for several hours. I thought it might be interesting to explain to F21 members what the Extinction Rebellion movement is and to share my own experiences of that day and my reflections afterwards. This article is written to stimulate debate and I write it as individual citizen and not in my role as a Forum 21 director.

WHAT IS EXTINCTION REBELLION?

If you have not yet heard about Extinction Rebellion (or XR for short), it is a new social movement that aims to drive radical change, through non-violent resistance and direct action in order to minimise species extinction and avert climate breakdown.

It was established in the UK early this year with about one hundred academics signing a call to action, and it is already spreading to other countries across the world.

The movement has also been gaining considerable momentum, because of many peoples' widespread concerns after the release of the latest hard-hitting IPCC report which gave stark predictions of the difference between a 1.5°C and 2.0°C increase in global temperatures with the warning that we may have only 12 years to take (radical) action to stop this happening. A further report from WWF about the level and speed of extinctions of vertebrate species added to this sense of urgency. XR has gained support from various politicians, including Green Party South West MEP Molly Scott Cato, as well as high profile environmentalists such as George Monbiot and Frome Councillor and 'Flatpack Democracy' advocate, Peter Macfadyen, who spoke at F21's recent AGM.

On the 31st October a Declaration of Rebellion was announced by XR and people were invited to pledge their support. The declaration stated:

We the undersigned find ourselves in an intolerable position. Ignoring the ecological crisis is no longer an option for us. The science is clear, on our current course, our children and grandchildren are being handed an unprecedented disaster, we are in the 6th mass species extinction. A catastrophe is certain, human extinction is a possibility.

Our Government is complicit in allowing greenhouse gas emissions to rise and ignoring the constraints of a finite planet in favour of an economic system demanding rampant consumerism. When a Government fails to protect its citizens from harm and fails to secure the future for generations to come it has failed on the most basic of its duties. Across the political spectrum, from John Locke to Thomas Hobbes, it is understood that the social contract with Government is broken in the face of such abject failure. We understand that it is not only our right, it is our duty to rebel on behalf of life itself.

Therefore, we the undersigned declare our support for the Extinction Rebellion. We stand behind the demands for the Government to tell the hard truth to its citizens and to come up with a credible plan for a rapid decarbonisation of our economy. To enable a Citizens Assembly to oversee this.

The Rebellion is underpinned by 3 core demands:

- The Government must tell the truth about the climate and wider ecological emergency, reverse inconsistent policies and work alongside the media to communicate with citizens.
- The Government must enact legally binding policy measures to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025 and to reduce consumption levels.
- A national Citizen's Assembly will be formed to oversee the changes, as part of creating a democracy fit for purpose.

In November 2018, various acts of civil disobedience have been taking place in London and across the UK, one of the biggest being the occupation of London bridges that I attended on the 17th November. In the following week smaller groups of XR activists employed 'swarming' tactics in which they popped up at different locations across the Capital and temporarily blocking roads before moving on. The aim was to cause maximum disruption with minimum numbers. These ongoing actions culminated on 24th November with a 'funeral procession' between Parliament and Buckingham Palace to mourn the environmental damage already done and the species already lost.

The movement is unusual in that a large number of activists have pledged to be arrested and are prepared to go to prison, if this means bringing attention to the wider public, media and especially politicians to the urgency of the situation the planet now faces. The November actions did indeed lead to a number of arrests. XR appear to have been very organised in preparing people to deal with being arrested and have been training activists in their legal rights and ensuring legal support is in place and that respectful non-violent communication is used throughout any interactions with the police and the authorities.

Citing inspiration from grassroots movements such as Occupy, Gandhi's independence movement, the Suffragettes, Martin Luther King and the Civil rights movement, Extinction Rebellion now intends to rally support worldwide around a common sense of urgency to tackle climate breakdown. The movement nationally is now suggesting, after several weeks of high-profile actions, that people stop to reflect and re-group over the winter. Regional groups are now getting organised and will be planning local actions over the coming months. XR have issued the following statement:

Rebels are encouraged to take all that they have learned and the news of our movement home to their own communities, cities, or countries, and begin organising the Rebellion there.

Time now to recuperate, reflect, reassess, reach out and to prepare every bit of ground, plant every seed, mulch every bed, protect every shoot for the flowers and fruits of [Extinction Rebellion](#) to rise up in the Spring.

April 15th. Save the date. We'll see you on the streets in Spring, rebels... and be fully worldwide by then.

STEPPING OFF THE BRIDGE

I am very aware that for many ordinary people the approach being taken by XR will feel uncomfortable, taking non-violent direction and knowingly breaking the law and being prepared to be arrested is most definitely not everyone's cup of tea. There will be arguments around whether this approach will be counter-productive and alienate and anger people. Friends who took part in the 'swarming' actions have re-counted that the verbal abuse from drivers and passers-by whose days were being disrupted certainly implies that universal support is not going to be immediately forth-coming. Radical action might also be in danger of losing or obscuring the complex, nuanced, scientific arguments around climate change and biodiversity loss and many half-truths and unproven 'facts' can easily and quickly be spread which are then vulnerable to demolition by those who hold a different world view and do not see the need for radical and immediate changes to how humans live on this planet.

The 'politics' behind such movements, however much efforts are made to be inclusive and beyond party politics, can also be off putting for some. Anti-capitalist sentiments are very evident amongst some who are supporting XR. This then gets mixed up with debates around our system that is tied to unsustainable economic growth and if this isn't working for the planet then what are the alternatives? Some might also argue that although the XR movement might in many ways feel like the 'anti-thesis' of the crude populism behind Trump in the USA and Bolsanaro in Brazil and the anti-immigrant sentiments behind some of the Brexit vote, it is itself still a populist movement with all the dangers inherent in that of believing there is simplistic answers to complex problems.

I was very aware of my own ambivalence and caution as I walked toward Westminster Bridge the other day. Having missed the initial mass action, I was texting friends already taking part to see if I could meet up with them, but in the end I found myself on the Westminster Bridge on my own. For a while I stood on the pavement which was still thronging with tourists and passers-by and I was unsure about whether to step over the barrier to join the many protestors in the middle of the road or just to watch from the side-lines. It was interesting to catch conversations between those passing by: "Bunch of Nature worriers" "Do they really think this will make any difference?" "It's a waste of time" etc.. Eventually I stepped over and joined the throng and listened to speeches from climate activists and people from other countries around the world who were witnesses for their own communities already affected by climate change. There were rousing songs and calls for actions and much friendly discussion. It was noticeable that although many in that crowd were clearly identifiable as 'typical environmentalists', there were people of all ages and all backgrounds there. Around 4pm as it got colder and darker and as the sun set behind the Houses of

Parliament, protestors who had been on the other bridges, ended their occupations and converged at Parliament Square where we all sat down *en masse* and listened to more rousing speeches and symbolically planted a tree. It is impossible to not be moved and to feel part of something in the middle of such a demonstration, knowing you are surrounded by people who share many similar views and who share my sense of urgency about the impending climate catastrophe. It would be remiss to say I was not feeling emotional and connected and inspired by the time we all dispersed.

After the demonstration had ended I found myself battling through the crowds on the South Bank and was quickly brought back down to 'reality' (if that's the right word?). Although we had felt, by closing down 5 bridges for several hours, we had brought central London to a stand- still, the police had in fact very quickly re-routed traffic and although tourists might have noticed activists waving flags on the bridges, and may be had even been mildly curious, their enjoyment of the sight and sounds of the Capital had been largely unimpeded and their world views not at all challenged. London is used to demonstrations. Indeed, earlier in the day I had come across another march by anti-racists heading toward Downing Street.

This feeling of impotency was further enhanced when I watched BBC News that evening, expecting this exciting and different kind of mass action to at least be mentioned briefly. It was ignored and was also not mentioned at all on other BBC news outlets such as Radio 4 all weekend. XR actions over the coming week continued to get only scant mention in most of the mainstream media (apart from predictable coverage by the Guardian, Independent and more fringe media outlets online). Interestingly and hugely ironically the BBC did report the huge protests across France against increased taxes on fuel prices which was supposed to be part of the attempt of Macron (the increasingly unpopular French president) to move toward a greener economy. Media coverage is clearly going to be key to the success of the XR movement in coming weeks and months, which begs the question of how radical does civil disobedience have to be before it gets mainstream journalists' attention? The experience has definitely re-awoken for me my critical views on mass media.

Of course, the other obvious realisation as I reflected on the weekend was that XR were never going to get that much attention at the moment because of Brexit. Whatever your views on this divisive subject there is no denying it is absorbing huge amounts of time and energy for both the media and more importantly the politicians. My own heart is heavy on this matter. Although at the moment it feels so vital to the future of the UK whether we have a deal or no deal or even remain (and in many ways it clearly is vital), for me the fast approaching potential chaos that will be caused by how our human activities are impacting the planet, will very soon dwarf all these debates over which version of 'economics as normal (based on unsustainable growth)' we choose to follow.

Being part of the XR actions in London that weekend also compared for me quite starkly with the weekend I had spent previous to that at the Somerset Wildlife Trust AGM in Frome. I am currently employed by the Trust and I was there to assist with the day. It was a good, well organised and well attended event (over 150 people) which showcased the great work the Trust is doing to protect the Somerset environment. The theme of the AGM was 'climate change' and in the afternoon there were 4 excellent presentations by leading climate change scientists and conservationists exploring the impact of climate change for us regionally. However, at one point in the afternoon, I was very aware that I was looking out across a room of grey-haired almost exclusively white people (probably of a certain socio-economic demographic!) and that they were sitting in polite silence looking at PowerPoint slides of graphs and maps showing gloomy predictions of where we are heading. There was a short Q&A session at the end and some hints of emotion and anger and the need for urgent action may be just about popped through, but otherwise the event ended with polite applause and tea and cake. The challenge for me now is to ask myself where I would prefer to be: listening passively to more talks from experts surrounded by other people of my age or older and asking some polite questions or being on a bridge in London on a cold November day being inspired by people of all ages and backgrounds to really challenge our Government to take urgent action. I guess they are not mutually exclusive, but like XR itself for me it is time to reflect and to keep talking and challenging myself and those around me ready to rise up and do what I can through F21, my work, or even XR, as we move into 2019?

I cannot predict where Extinction Rebellion will go or how it might expand or evolve, but a personal level, I am glad I was present at the bridge occupations. The protests were non-violent, respectful and inspirational. Despite the stunning silence from the media, it felt like I might be part of something new and important. I am going to stay open and supportive of XR and continue to let myself be challenged by this radical approach and to be ready to 'step up' directly or indirectly in whatever my heart and head leads me. Whatever people may think about the tactics of XR, there is no doubt in my mind that they have already succeeded in one way - they have got people talking. But as they themselves are saying may be the time for talking is now over and it is action we need - action from ordinary people to show how much we care and action by governments to make the brave and radical decisions needed to avert the worst-case scenario that our scientists are telling us is going to happen.

I would be really interested to hear other people's views on this matter and to keep the conversation going over the coming months. I can be contacted via Forum 21? Or personal email....?