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British eco-activists are asking: is disruption the best way to avert climate disaster?

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On a bright, chilly morning in January, seven women – some young, some older, all condemned as guilty by the state – gathered at Southwark crown court in London.

The group had already been convicted of criminal damage following an Extinction Rebellion action in April 2021 that involved breaking windows at the headquarters of Barclays Bank: a financial institution responsible for more than £4bn of fossil fuel financing during that year alone. “In case of climate emergency break glass”, read stickers they stuck to the shattered panes. Now they were being sentenced. After a long preamble, the judge eventually handed down suspended terms, sparing the defendants jail for the time being. But he used his closing remarks to condemn their protest as a “stunt” that wouldn’t help to solve the climate crisis. “You risk alienating those who you look to for support,” he warned.

Is he right? Outside the courtroom, that’s a question Extinction Rebellion has been pondering for some time. At the beginning of this year, we received an answer of sorts: the movement released a statement on New Year’s Eve, dramatically titled “We Quit”, in which it announced it would “temporarily shift away from public disruption as a primary tactic” and promised that its next major action would “leave the locks, glue and paint behind”. Instead, it called upon anyone concerned about climate change to gather peacefully outside parliament on 21 April as part of a mobilisation that will “prioritise attendance over arrest and relationships over roadblocks”. In response, Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain – the high-profile environmental action groups that have outflanked Extinction Rebellion in recent years when it comes to disruptive public protests – both reasserted their commitment to direct civil resistance.

In truth, few believe that when it comes to the climate emergency there is a binary choice between radical protests and less confrontational forms of activism. Whether acknowledged or not, the former often depend upon the latter to make themselves and their demands appear more palatable to powerbrokers. There is already evidence of a positive symbiotic relationship between the “extreme” and “moderate” wings of the UK environmental movement, with Just Stop Oil interventions being found to increase public support for Friends of the Earth.

Debates over the pros and cons of different forms of activism are nothing new within the climate movement. What lends this one a particular urgency is the scale and pace of planetary destruction under the status quo - last year, the IPCC issued its “bleakest warning yet” regarding humanity’s future.

417 words