

Life In Rebellion For Life

On Thursday 10 October 2019, I was arrested at London City Airport. The charge was obstruction of the highway. I was taking part in the Extinction Rebellion protests.

This is not the first time I have been arrested. The first time was 15 November 1983. Thirty-eight years ago. With hundreds of others, I was blockading Parliament in protest about the arrival of Cruise missiles into this country. On that night, about 300 people were arrested.

These last four decades have been the years of rampant individualism and market fundamentalism. Decades of deregulation, intensifying competition and diminishing social support systems. Back in the early 1980s, talk of climate change and climate crisis was virtually unknown. However, over these past four decades, it has become increasingly clear that climate change is real and that climate catastrophe is happening.

We face an emergency which threatens the existence of many billions of living beings. I cannot sit back and just sign petitions, just vote every few years, just be an ethical consumer. Action is necessary.

Planetary Arsonists

We live in a world dominated by the 1%. This 1% are planetary arsonists. In recent years, some of these arsonists have seamlessly shifted from climate denial to climate doom. Some have already made their bunker preparations, leaving everyone else to an uncertain and precarious future. Futures of forest fires, collapsing species populations, floods, rising temperatures, ever more extreme weather events.

According to Oxfam, in January 2019 the world's 26 richest individuals held as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population. In the US, after making adjustment for inflation, 50% of the population have had no income growth since 1980. By contrast in the same time period, the top 10% have doubled their income and the top 1% have tripled their income.

Governments make declarations and businesses promise to do better but so often these are fig leaves and empty words. The largest emissions continue to be produced by the wealthiest countries – while the most serious consequences of these emissions are experienced by the poorest countries.

In the words of historian Simon Schama: “For some time now, the cult of the individual and the hollowing out of government, the better to strip away any impediments to the optimisation of profit, has been riding high.”

But this does not have to be the way. Many movements have taken action in response to this situation. It is in this context that we need to understand what happened at London City Airport in October 2019.

Air Pollution

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has stated that air pollution is a leading cause of global mortality. According to Public Health England, there is substantial evidence that air pollution

causes the development of heart disease, respiratory disease and lung cancer. Children are especially vulnerable: millions are at risk of lifelong breathing disorders, chest infections and earlier death.

Professor Chris Griffiths from Queen Mary's University London has said "air pollution in cities is damaging lung development in children...We are raising a generation of children reaching adulthood with stunted lung capacity."

Children in London are growing up with lung volumes up to 15% lower than the UK average. Air pollution levels around London City Airport consistently exceed EU legal limits. Rather than acting to reduce pollution levels, London City Airport seeks to increase the number of flights. Thus increasing air pollution; thus increasing the risks to those who are most vulnerable.

London City Airport is predominantly used by wealthy frequent fliers. These are business people on short-haul flights in smaller jets that have a disproportionately large carbon footprint. The reality is that 70% of all flights in the UK are taken by just 15% of the population. London City Airport is the world in miniature: a small polluting elite, a large number of victims who have to deal with the side-effects.

This is why I was sitting in the road at London City Airport. Protests such as these are sending out signals that significant changes are required. People throughout history have questioned power and challenged authority by a variety of different means: words, pictures, marches, strikes, sitdowns, occupations, rebellions.

What was once considered 'normal' or 'the way things are' has been shown again and again to be temporary and changeable. From women getting the vote to the ending of slavery, from apartheid in South Africa to decreasing use of fossil fuels.

Protests made these changes possible. Without protest – that questioning and the challenging – our lives could and probably would be substantially more restricted and more exploited. I stand (and sit down) in this tradition of protest. Protest is part of what makes us human.

The London Mayor Sadiq Khan stated in April 2019: "I would do everything in my power to tackle London's toxic air crisis." Action is needed now. A train is coming down the tracks. Air pollution and the continuing destruction of environment are emergencies that need to be declared.

At the start of this pandemic – March 2020 – the Indian writer and politician Shashi Tharoor declared: "The blissful sight of blue skies and the joy of breathing clean air provides just the contrast to illustrate what we are doing to ourselves the rest of the time."

Competing and Co-operation

Competition has certainly played a role in the evolution of humans. But the truth is that we have evolved predominantly to co-operate and share. We are a social species, we need a herd to both survive and thrive – and much of our success as a species has been about working together: co-operation more than competing.

Extinction Rebellion – and other movements – question the belief systems which prioritise achievements and acquisitions. Ask whether there is more to life than the accumulating of money and power. Suggest that life is not just about consuming more materials.

Protest can be small steps, great defeats, sudden shifts. It is much better for our well-being to protest than to stay uncomfortably quiet. It is much better for our well-being to stand up and speak out about the power dynamics that maintain the privileges and the positions of a few: the planetary arsonists.

I acted to draw attention to the serious harm of climate crisis. The question is: if not now, then when? I did this because I believe it is necessary to take a stand. I protest to ensure our future prospects are not damaged by what we are doing right now. My action of blockading London City Airport is civil disobedience on the grounds of conscience.

The former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner Mary Robinson, stated after the October 2019 Extinction Rebellion protests: “the truth is we need disruption ... [Change] will only happen if there is enough disruption of business as usual.”

The pandemic teaches us that nothing is predictable, all plans are provisional, nothing is certain. The pandemic teaches us that enormous changes are possible – because the changes implemented to deal with this pandemic point to what can be done to deal with the climate crisis.

Substantially reducing emissions in a short time is achievable. Industries can significantly alter focus from producing consumer goods to building ventilators and solar panels: socially useful products. People willingly and rapidly change occupation; such as from selling duty frees to saving human lives – like the Swedish flight attendants retrained as nurses.

Then the question is: what are our aspirations? How can we create conditions for society and ecology that are grounded in sustainability and inclusivity? The *Tao Te Ching* (a 4th-century BCE text from China) states “the great pine tree grows from a tiny seed.” What seeds could we be planting right now?

Let us imagine what might be: more equitable distribution of resources, possessing fewer unnecessary things, less striving for more. A reconstructing of the climate crisis doomsday machines we have been ever so busy building. Becoming more thoughtful of our impacts and more responsible for our actions. Rather than profit being prioritised over planet, being conscious of life, kindness, love.

This is life in rebellion for life.

Norman Blair
20 April 2021

This statement was substantially inspired and influenced by statements from other Extinction Rebellion defendants. Read more here:

<https://extinctionrebellion.uk/category/the-arrestees/>

Postscript

At the court case on Wednesday 7 April 2021, I pleaded not guilty; I read this statement to the magistrates. Unsurprisingly they found me guilty; the sentence was conditional discharge for six months plus £796 in court costs.

I will definitely do this again...

Further Reading

There are many books and articles on these subjects. Four books that I particularly recommend are: *Why Rebel* by Jay Griffiths; *Corona, Climate, Chronic emergency: war communism in the 21st century* by Andreas Malm; and these two wonderful novels: *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and *The Ministry For The Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson.

There are other pieces (and ways of staying in touch) here:

<https://extinctionrebellion.uk>

Footnotes

I consciously did not use footnotes in this article because I wish for it to flow easily. However, I know that referencing is important; here are references:

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<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/robinson-backs-extinction-rebellion-s-disruption-of-business-as-usual-1.4047944>

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