

ZION LIGHTS

HOT-EARTH REBELS

*Over the past year, Extinction Rebellion has drawn a new generation into mass civil disobedience over climate change—literally bringing the London traffic to a halt. Could you tell us about your background, and how you got involved in XR?*

I WAS BORN IN 1984 and grew up in an industrial suburb of Birmingham. My parents were from India—a little village in the Punjab—and came over to get factory jobs. I actually began thinking about environmental issues as a child—we learnt about the Amazon rainforest and global warming in school; this was around the time of the 90s Rio Earth Summit. There was a TV advertising campaign about taking care of the planet—turn the taps off, switch out the light when you leave the room—which had the tagline, ‘It’s not too late.’ I remember watching it with a horrible feeling: what if we *are* leaving it too late? I used to get my parents to collect all our glass bottles and take them down to the bottle bank for recycling when we went shopping on a Saturday. And I turned vegetarian too. At university I was part of a campaign to switch the campus to renewable energy, which we won. And later I was involved in the Climate Action Camp, which focused on corporations rather than public disruption.

Then my children were born, which was a turning point. The stakes seemed higher: what situation were they going to inherit? I’d moved to Devon and was doing a lot of freelance writing about environmental politics and sustainable lifestyles, including a book called *The Ultimate Guide to Green Parenting*, put out by *New Internationalist*—it’s a science-based approach to green birth, baby essentials, greening your home. So,

like a lot of people, I was chipping away on my own. When I first saw Extinction Rebellion come into being, I was excited, of course, and got in touch with my local group—but I thought it might be another movement that would just fizzle out, like the Climate Camps or Occupy. With the April Rebellion this spring, when we blocked five sites in London—Oxford Circus, Marble Arch, Parliament Square, Piccadilly Circus, Waterloo Bridge—I realized this was different. I helped take Waterloo Bridge, which turned into a sort of festival, with huge numbers of people turning up after seeing us on television, many of whom had never been involved in protest before. We ended up staying there for two weeks. That's when I thought, if anything works, it's this. I gave up my other work and ended up switching over full-time to Extinction Rebellion.

*So how did Extinction Rebellion get started?*

What really galvanized XR was the 2018 IPCC Report, *Global Warming of 1.5°C*—just as it did Greta Thunberg and the school-students who protested in the Fridays for the Future campaign. The International Panel on Climate Change is very careful in its formulations to avoid anything scientifically contentious—it always seeks a broad consensus among the international climate scientists whose work it draws on. They agree that the global mean surface temperature now is around 0.87° higher than the 1850–1900 average, the proxy for the 'pre-industrial level'. Over the last thirty years, as carbon emissions have soared, it's been rising at roughly 0.2° per decade. This warming has already brought loss of ice, rainfall changes—increased droughts and floods—and ocean acidification, as the seawater absorbs carbon. The southern Arctic permafrost is already softening, the northern tundra and boreal forests are changing, sea levels are rising and marine ecosystems have already been affected—70 per cent of warm-water coral reefs are dying off and fish populations are migrating to cooler regions. At 1.5° hotter—and the greenhouse effects of past emissions guarantee we'll reach it by 2040—these present problems will be intensified, with the Arctic ecosystems, high mountain ranges and coastal regions most affected. But the IPCC Report warned that simply limiting global warming to 1.5° will require 'rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society'—and if we don't make those changes now, cutting emissions by 40 per cent in the next twelve years, global temperatures will increase well above that, with terrifying effects.

*XR was launched in October 2018, the same month as the IPCC Report?*

Yes. Its precursor was a group called Rising Up, started eighteen months before by some long-standing direct-action campaigners. There was Gail Bradbrook, who'd been involved in environmental campaigns since she was a teenager and had led anti-fracking protests around Stroud in Gloucestershire. There was Simon Bramwell, a builder and bushcraft teacher, who founded the Stroud-based Compassionate Revolution group in 2015 with Gail and George Barda, an Occupy and Greenpeace activist. Roger Hallam was studying civil disobedience at King's College, London; originally he'd been an organic farmer in Wales, but he could see the impact of climate change on his crops and began reading up about it. Clare Farrell was a fashion designer, she does a lot of XR's art work—the block printing, for example. Robin Boardman was a student from Bristol, a bit younger than the rest.

*It's striking that so many of the original Extinction Rebels seem to come from the West Country—the Cotswolds, mid-Wales, down to Somerset and Devon—a region of small towns, hills and moors, and mixed farming, compared to the flat fields of East Anglia. It used to be seen as majority-conservative, though since the seventies, counter-cultural networks have been flourishing there.*

Yes, it's interesting—you get painted as middle class, yet Gail is a Yorkshire miner's daughter, and I'm the child of immigrant factory workers. My parents certainly weren't hippies—though some people think they must have been, to call me Zion. They're very hard-working, very pro-capitalist, because that enabled them to get out of poverty—although I tell them, actually, capitalism is the reason you're in poverty. But they do care about ecological issues, because they know what's going on in India—the droughts, the terrible smog.

*So what motivated Rising Up?*

The starting point was the need to find a more effective form of protest than what we'd all been doing to date. Pretty much none of this came out of our own innovative thinking. It was about looking at the research, adding up the facts. Conventional A-to-B marches don't work: millions of us demonstrated against the Iraq War and it didn't make any difference.

A key piece of research was Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works*. They take data from hundreds of 20th-century social movements and analyse what they did right and what they did wrong. The most successful ones, those that had their demands met, used forms of decentralized, non-violent civil disobedience—large-scale direct action. The tipping-point, Chenoweth and Stephan found, was to get 3.5 per cent of the population involved. That's not a huge number—it's about two million in the UK. But it's not just about getting them to demonstrate, because unfortunately that doesn't make any difference. It's about getting them involved at a higher level. If two million people bring the capital city to a stand-still, what can the government do? They can't arrest that many people. We saw that in the April and October Rebellions this year: even when the number of people arrested was in the thousands, the police and the judicial system were overwhelmed.

*It's interesting that Extinction Rebellion borrows from this US 'colour revolutions' tradition. Although Chenoweth herself started from a slightly different area of expertise, in counter-terrorism and advice to Homeland Security about US financial-sector vulnerabilities, her work on civil disobedience chimes broadly with the Albert Einstein Institute approach. Maria Stephan works for the US State Department at NATO HQ and in Afghanistan. But how did the Rising Up activists put this approach into practice?*

It's not a blueprint, but the research is useful. So, in May 2018, about fifteen Rising Up people met in a cafe in Bristol and agreed on a strategy. They set themselves the target of addressing a hundred meetings of potential activists up and down the country, giving people the facts about the climate emergency, explaining that, in face of government inaction, they were going to declare a rebellion on 31 October 2018 in Parliament Square and asking people to ask themselves what role they would like to play. The Declaration of Rebellion was drafted by Simon Bramwell. It's a really beautiful piece of prose, declaring that it's our duty to rebel against our failing government—'We act in peace, with a ferocious love of these lands in our hearts'. Some 1,500 people turned up for the declaration—far more than expected. That was followed by a spate of civil-disobedience actions in central London—sit-ins on bridges, planting trees outside Parliament, people super-gluing themselves to Buckingham Palace—which really caught the public's attention. That was when Extinction

Rebellion erupted into the headlines, in November 2018. The April 2019 Rebellion was much bigger, as I said, and the October 2019 Rebellion bigger still in terms of numbers, though the police prevented us from taking the bridges and kept us in Trafalgar Square.

*This mode of organizing suggests a radical break with Occupy's approach to operating by consensus?*

XR uses a self-organizing system based on features of the holacracy model. The idea is to be able to harness group wisdom while still being able to set clear targets and respond quickly in fluid situations. Local groups are the basic community-organizing structures, but we recommend that, as they grow, they should split into smaller working groups or circles, each focusing on its own specialist area. Each circle can choose its own coordinator; the coordinators then meet to decide key local issues. Local groups can connect with each other through regional and national coordination.

Nationally, there are a whole series of different circles, each with its own mandate, and they work pretty much autonomously of each other. The Actions and Logistics circle decides on the dates and frames for actions. The Media and Messaging circle decides about organizing press conferences and press releases, covering relations with TV and the press; we've also set up our own paper, *The Hourglass*, which now has its own branch. There's a Political circle that meets with politicians; a Finance circle which takes care of donations and fundraising, and checks everything with the Legal team; a Regenerative Culture circle, a Communities circle, a Tech circle and so on. Some of the circles are quite large and have lots of teams branching off, but each has its own clearly defined role. All the circles have at least two coordinators, one internal, the other external—feeding back information to the coordinators of other circles. The Anchor circle encompasses all the others. We organize discussions through WhatsApp and Zoom video-conferencing calls.

Coordinators from different circles have to work together: for planning the big rebellions, the Action and Political circles formulate demands, the Arts circle needs to know what the Action circle needs, and the Action circle needs to know how much money there is from Finance.

Media and Messaging is one of the bigger circles: we have between fifteen and twenty key coordinators, though that shifts around as different branches develop. The Social Media team decides on the hashtags, like #EverybodyNow before the rebellion and #WheresYourPlan. The idea for a funeral march, to stage the extinction of our future, came from brainstorming in the Arts circle. It was first performed in London with people solemnly burying a coffin marked 'Nature'. But then the local and regional groups picked it up, and it very quickly caught on in other countries around the world.

*As we understand it, the holacracy model is a management structure derived from the 'holarchies'—the natural hierarchies—in Arthur Koestler's Ghost in the Machine?*

Well, again, we don't practice that model, we just derive some features from it where they seem to be useful for building an inclusive, participatory movement. The important thing is that anyone can start a local group and take action in the name of Extinction Rebellion, as long as they adhere to XR's principles and values, and work towards realizing its three demands. As you can see from the map on our website, over two hundred XR groups have been set up across the UK, so it seems to be working!

*Could you talk us through XR's three demands?*

Number one is for the government to tell the truth about the climate and ecological emergency; we need the state to mobilize all-out, like in wartime, to halt the crisis. The second demand is to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions to net zero by 2025 and to halt bio-diversity loss—the 2019 IPBES Report on bio-diversity says that one in seven species is now at risk of extinction. Third, a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice, to decide which policies to push forward. This would be a jury-like structure, chosen by lot to get a cross-section of society. Parliament will remain, but it will play an advisory role to the Citizens' Assembly.

*These are quite general demands. Might it not be more effective to call for three more concrete actions, like legislating and budgeting for a mandatory switch to renewable energy, or making public transport free and strictly limiting the use of private vehicles or air travel?*

I don't think we should pretend to be experts on all the factors involved. Of course there are things that I would like to see, like blue-green infrastructure—using as many local spaces as possible to plant trees and capture carbon. The billions poured into fossil-fuel subsidies could be diverted into cleaner energy and technology. Maybe we need to transition away from air travel, or offer incentives to develop a more ecological way to fly. But I would be hesitant to say, let's pick three solutions, because we definitely need more than that! The experts have a lot of solutions, but we need to forge a strategy from them in a democratic way, taking care of the needs of the most vulnerable. That's where the Citizens' Assembly comes in.

Plus, our first demand—tell the truth—gives people a platform to take their own demands forward. For instance, it has taken a lot of work to ensure that our XR Farmers group and Animal Rebellion are cooperating and not antagonizing each other. Even in the energy sector, it's quite a minefield. If you look at the IPCC report, its models for bringing down carbon emissions to a net total of zero by 2050 rely on the use of nuclear power and negative-emission technologies, many of which are untested: where will the captured carbon be stored, and what effect will it have on those habitats? The truth is simple: there's an emergency, that's just a fact. The solutions and social implications, they're complex.

*People who've got involved in the Rebellions, often first-time young activists, speak very highly of the welcome and induction techniques that XR provides. Could you tell us about them?*

We call it the XR DNA. It was developed by Robin Boardman and the Communities team, and it goes through the values and principles of XR, what got us here, how we operate, how to join in—the three DNA building blocks are story, strategy, structure. We run it at festivals or you can do it online. You can just click on a Zoom call and have a welcome and an introduction. The idea is that the DNA transmits the information that allows the movement to develop and lays a solid foundation for its culture. The training is also really good in helping people find where they can fit in. We have what we call XR butterflies who float around from team to team—I was a butterfly when I joined, because there's always so much that needs doing in each team, and there's no leader allocating people to different types of work. You have to find your own place individually and work out what you're good at, which can take time.

*Your mode of drawing people into civil disobedience—the process of education, of people being able to take their own decisions about how they want to be involved—is a striking contrast to the vanguardist approach of a tradition like the Black Bloc. Could you talk us through a few concrete examples of how decisions are made?*

Generally our model is: if you want to take an action, and it's non-violent, you can. You don't have to get permission from anyone; you don't have to go through some body that assesses it. But sometimes there are really strong disagreements. Before the 2019 October Rebellion, Roger Hallam and some others in the Action circle proposed using drones to disrupt Heathrow Airport. Quite a few of us saw the proposal coming up on WhatsApp groups and went, 'Actually, maybe we're not happy with that.' There was a lot of discussion, with some arguing that it wasn't non-violent—because drones are used as weapons—and that our priority should be mass civil disobedience in the capital, rather than a small-group action out at Heathrow. It went back and forth, but most people weren't comfortable with the action, and eventually we said that it shouldn't be an XR action. So they organized as a separate group, the Heathrow Pause, which had thirty or forty people in it, many of whom weren't in XR anyway. So we decided that using a kind of consensus.

It's not a perfect system. It didn't work in the case of the Canning Town Station action this October, when a small group of protesters climbed on the roof of a train, stopping it from moving, and angry passengers dragged them off. Someone set up a poll the night before which found that over 70 per cent of XR people didn't want it to go ahead—and then it did. If we'd had more time, we could have followed the same process as with Heathrow. But that can be quite slow: you get the coordinators talking to their teams and then feeding back to the other coordinators, usually over Zoom or WhatsApp—there are too many WhatsApp chats. And most of us were on the ground in Trafalgar Square at the time, so there was no opportunity to discuss it. But so many people were upset by it that we're now talking about streamlining the process, so that key people in each team can come together and take decisions quickly. Something like this will probably happen again, because we're such a big movement, growing so quickly.

The Action circle is always quite strategic and careful about ensuring that roadblocks don't prevent people from getting to a hospital, for example.



We chose those five bridges to block in November 2018 because they're always shutdown for the London Marathon, so there's obviously a plan in place to keep emergency services clear. There was total support for most of the actions this October: the mothers and babies' nurse-in outside the Google office; the Youth group climbing up the YouTube building; the huge wooden pyramid at Oxford Circus; the National Portrait Gallery protest against BP sponsorship. Then there are always smaller ongoing actions carried out by local groups. 'Clean up Barclays' was taken up by lots of groups—activists with mops and buckets, swabbing down the bank branches, calling on them to disinvest from fossil fuels. The regional groups are completely autonomous.

*Have Extinction Rebellion groups been established in any other countries?*

Yes. After the November 2018 rebellion, XR groups were springing up everywhere—we counted 655 local groups in 56 countries. This October there was a major action in New York in Times Square, and another in Madrid. There were lots of small-scale actions, where the groups are smaller or where protest is more dangerous. In each country, members decide what is appropriate for them and adapt the model—and, of course, they work alongside existing environmental organizations, as we do. There's an XR campaign to challenge Bolsonaro's government in Brazil on state-sanctioned violence and ecocide by landowners and miners, in solidarity with indigenous groups. This August, Brazilian embassies in eleven countries were sprayed with blood-red paint and slogans like *Sangue Indígena, Nenhuma Gota a Mais*—indigenous blood, not one drop more. But there, for example, the XR coordinator couldn't do a magazine interview because it would have put their life at risk—especially on issues around deforestation. The Brazilian group has added a new first demand, about ecology and justice for indigenous people's rights. The situation is just as bad in Colombia, and much less reported. Five indigenous leaders were assassinated there recently, and 700 have been killed since 2016. Indigenous peoples are the best caretakers of their land, but instead of being given stewardship of it, they're being murdered on a horrendous scale.

*How would you assess Extinction Rebellion's achievements to date?*

Our first demand—for the government to tell the truth—hasn't exactly been met. Corbyn moved for the British parliament to declare

a climate emergency, which was passed, but the Johnson government didn't budge. During the October Rebellion, Johnson himself called us 'uncooperative crusties', though a minion came to collect one of the trees XR was distributing in Parliament Square. They're still subsidizing the fossil-fuel industry, still talking about expanding Heathrow Airport—so our second demand has not been met either. Strangely enough the call for a Citizens' Assembly, which I always thought was our most radical demand, has been the most successful. Climate Assembly UK will take place at the start of 2020, over four weekends, with 110 members drawn from 30,000 households. The House of Commons set it up through several of its Select Committees.

The Scottish government will also be creating an assembly to make recommendations on how to reach net zero emissions. A couple of smaller assemblies have already taken place in Camden and Oxford, and several other local councils—Devon, Leeds, Sheffield—are planning to follow suit. Even though Johnson has ignored our demands, over half the local governments in the UK have now got their own figures for reducing emissions between 2025 and 2050, and some of them are quite ambitious. Regional XR groups are lobbying their municipalities for measures like free public transport; they're looking at issues like clean air around schools. There was even a police station in Surrey that declared a climate emergency.

As it has been taken up more widely, our first demand has also been broadened out, from 'Tell the truth' to 'What's your truth?'—what should your community, your industry, be doing about the crisis? We now have a Media Tell the Truth team that focuses on trying to get the press to report on the climate. There's Culture Declares, for artists to get involved, and also Writers Rebel. During the October Rebellion there was an action to shut down London Fashion Week, to get the fashion industry to tell the truth about their water wastage and emissions. And what will it take to make the aviation sector bring down emissions? What does society look like if we tell the truth about the emergency we're in—and in which directions should it move?