

Extinction Repression

How the state criminalizes climate activists

Green Anticapitalist Front

25th July 2019

We can imagine the surprise of Extinction Rebellion (XR) members last week, reading themselves described as ‘extremists’ and ‘anarchists’. These labels come courtesy of the former head of counter-terrorism for the Metropolitan Police Richard Walton and his co-author Tom Wilson, in a report demanding that ‘the honeymoon that Extinction Rebellion has enjoyed to date needs to come to an end.’ The days of cops skateboarding along bridges and dancing with protestors may soon be over. A different treatment now awaits XR’s rebels. They may not understand why. But we understand all too clearly.

Walton retired from the Metropolitan Police in a disgraceful attempt to dodge corruption charges surrounding the MacPherson Inquiry.¹ This inquiry had been called in response to the Met’s mishandling of the racially-motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence. While this inquiry was ongoing, a spycop for the Met going by ‘David Hagen’ was spying on the Lawrence family. Bob Lambert (the spycop involved in infiltrating Greenpeace), Richard Walton and ‘David Hagen’ met in Lambert’s garden where intelligence on the Lawrence family and the campaign groups supporting them was passed to Walton so he could prepare the police commissioner for the Met’s response. Far from Walton being just one rotten apple, the MacPherson Inquiry had been launched to investigate corruption and racism within the Metropolitan Police and concluded that the Met was ‘institutionally racist’.

This institutionalized racism pervades the Met to this very day,² as we saw in Extinction Rebellion’s ‘Week of Rebellion’, when on the 19th April London’s cops attacked and arrested a black woman, who was unaffiliated with XR, for simply trying to walk down a street.³ Indeed we saw this racism extend to those in XR who were so keen to work with the police, as on the 22nd April XR’s police liasons in Marble Arch reported a group of Asian activists for crimes they had not commit, subjecting them to detainment and immigration checks.⁴ The authors of this report are no strangers to racism either: in their previous report for the Policy Exchange (which has

¹ Police chief accused of covering up secret ploy to spy on the family of murdered Stephen Lawrence dodges disciplinary action by retiring by Stephen Wright, for the Daily Mail

² Metropolitan police still institutionally racist, say black and Asian officers by Hugh Muir, for the Guardian

³ Police officer pushes woman at Extinction Rebellion protest by News Leak

⁴ Selling Extinction by Prolekult

a habit of publishing racist reports based on fabricated evidence⁵), Walton and Wilson claimed that defining ‘Islamophobia’ as a form of racism would ‘cripple’ counter-terrorism policing.⁶

The police call their own violence ‘law’ and ‘justice’, whilst calling the self-defensive actions of individuals ‘crime’ and ‘extremism’. This report is yet more proof that it does not matter how family-friendly your image is: whether you’re a grieving family member or a nonviolent climate protest, if you threaten the status quo the state must declare you a threat. XR can sing songs and make art and tell the cops they love them, but if there is even a chance that they will challenge the system they must be crushed.

The authors are not subtle about this. In a report called ‘Extremism Rebellion’, the word ‘extremism’ and its variations only occur 19 times; ‘environmental’, 48 times. Variations on ‘capitalism’ appear 101 times.⁷

It is obsessive. Even we anti-capitalists do not usually devote so much breath to the word.

What is clear to anyone masochistic enough to read the 73-page report: Walton and Wilson are especially terrified by the possibility of XR presenting *compelling non-capitalist visions of society* – far more terrified than he is by the prospect of the ecological devastation against which we fight. He claims XR are at heart secret anti-capitalists, and tries to find evidence of such unforgivable politics. (Well, if we have been missing a trick and it is actually true that ‘at its core, Extinction Rebellion is an anti-capitalist movement’, the Green Anti-Capitalist Front are happy to hear it.)

It is no coincidence that they focus on the slogan strung across the pink boat – *SYSTEM CHANGE NOT CLIMATE CHANGE* – because that call for system change is at the heart of XR’s ‘extremist’ threat. And so the authors call for a far-reaching response from government: ‘Simply acting against the protestors, however, will not be enough to undermine Extinction Rebellion, which may be on the verge of becoming a wider social movement [...] more also needs to be done to counter the extreme message of Extinction Rebellion who argue that catastrophe can only be averted if the free market and economic growth are abandoned.’⁸

It is also no coincidence that this report is being published by the Policy Exchange, a right-wing think tank set up by a cabal of Conservative Party politicians and business executives including Nick Boles, Michael Gove, Frances Maude and Archie Norman.⁹

Their current chairman is Alexander Downer, former Australian Foreign Minister turned fossil fuel lobbyist, who is currently on the boards of Lakes Oil and surveillance-tech giant Huawei.¹⁰¹¹¹² Policy Exchange is also one of the few think tanks in the country that refuses to release information about their funding, however we do know that they have received money from BP and Peter Cruddas (a corrupt tory donor with investments in fossil fuels).¹³¹⁴ Suffice to say, Policy Exchange has a vested interest in the preservation of the fossil fuel industry, the expansion of state powers and the proliferation of surveillance capitalism.

⁵ Disastrous Misjudgement? by Peter Barron, for the BBC

⁶ Islamophobia – Crippling Counter Terrorism by Richard Walton and Tom Wilson, for the Policy Exchange

⁷ Extremism Rebellion by Richard Walton and Tom Wilson, for the Policy Exchange

⁸ Extremism Rebellion by Richard Walton and Tom Wilson, for the Policy Exchange

⁹ Thinkers behind fresh Tory policies move up in party hierarchy by David Hencke, for the Guardian

¹⁰ Downer joins Lakes Oil as Rinehart board appointee by Peter Cai, for the Sydney Morning Herald

¹¹ Huawei names John Brumby, Alexander Downer board members by Michael Sainsbury, for the Australian

¹² Policy Exchange is delighted to announce that our next Chairman of Trustees will be Alexander Downer, High Commissioner of Australia by the Policy Exchange

¹³ After Blair by Ravid Chandiramani, for Brand Republic

¹⁴ Financial Statement 2008-09, p. 11.; Financial Statement 2009-10, p. 13. by the Peter Cruddas Foundation

The recommendations of this report would affect us all, and it is gruesomely easy to imagine how euphemisms like these might play out in reality: ‘Legislation relating to public protest needs to be urgently reformed in order to strengthen the ability of the police to place restrictions on planned protest and deal more effectively with mass law-breaking tactics.’ Naturally: the police want to handle protestors even more brutally – they are frustrated this is not currently legal – they call for even more brutality to be made legal, then. This is the system change *they* want.

What happens next will probably not surprise us. If people like Richard Walton get their way, the bare minimum will be increased restrictions on protests, harsher legislation, heavier sentencing, and all the other methods with which we are sadly familiar. This is no new story. That does not mean we should ignore it.

This report claimed that ‘Extinction Rebellion is now at a crossroads’, and we are watching to see which direction it takes. How will it respond to increased repression? Will it change the way it describes police and prisons once so many of its rebels experience their violence first-hand? Will it tone down its criticisms of capitalism in an attempt to appease the police and conservative politicians? Or will it understand that being a rebel means acknowledging the brutal reality of state repression and the systems it exists to defend, and struggling on in defiance of this?

The Green Anti-Capitalist Front stands in solidarity with all those who suffer from state violence and repression in the fight against climate change, and we do not look forward to seeing XR’s rebels being met with increased brutality. We support the challenges to capitalism which would make XR such a source of fear for some, and we know that we, too, will be met with brutality when we make them.

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