
Taking the
PARTY



out of
POLITICS

HOW IT'S SUPPOSED TO WORK
- WHY IT ISN'T WORKING -
AND HOW TO FIX IT.

Hello and Welcome to *Taking the Party out of Politics!*

This is a podcast about understanding how politics is supposed to work, ...
... why it isn't working as well as it could be working, ...
... and what we might be able to do about it.

Because:

by understanding a little bit more clearly *how* things are supposed to work,
and *why* they are a bit messed up,
we *might* be able to get things to work a *bit better*. Perhaps even a *lot better*.

This is a little journey we are taking together, about the systems and functioning of Politics:
systems which we should all understand, because those systems affect all of our lives, all of
the time.

And this podcast is about how we might be able to make those systems work a bit better.

In Season 1, we took a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of
us – the voters.

In Season 2, we took a look at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of
someone trying to get elected, and then trying to do a good job.

Looking ahead, in Season 3, we will be looking at what we might be able to do, to make
things work a bit better. Importantly, when we get to Season 3, we will be sharing our ideas,
but also sharing some of the best of YOUR ideas, about how to make things work a bit
better.



Today, we are launching the first of a mini-series, looking at people, organisations, and issues which fall outside the established (party) political systems. We are looking at how some of those people and organisations are seeking to influence what happens in this country, and in the world more generally – in other words, seeking to affect *politics* (but – not necessarily – bothered about *party* politics). And we will be looking at some of the issues which currently aren't being addressed successfully by our political party dominated system of politics.

Today, we're going to start by looking at **protest**.

Protest, as a way of raising issues, influencing political parties, influencing the way in which all of us might think about something, and influencing what might actually happen.

Protest has actually been in the news recently, because there have been attempts to reduce the right to protest. There is a new government crime bill, which is currently making its way through the Houses of Parliament (if you are interested in the various steps involved in that, have a listen to Episode 15 'Parliament'), and part of it is trying to reduce the right to protest, where protests might cause disruption.

But, isn't disruption the heart of protest?

How else is a small group of people going to get their message heard by other people, or by the government, or by their employer?

If you, and everyone you work with, are unhappy with your working conditions, of course you start by having a conversation with your company or with your employer. If that doesn't work, then what do you do? Well, you could give up, but that doesn't make things any better. So, you organise some sort of protest.

Now, your protest could be in the park on Sunday afternoon, but how is that going to make your company or employer pay any attention? Why should they care?

Or, your protest could be outside the factory gates, on Monday morning. Making it uncomfortable for your employers as they have to drive past you, and all your colleagues, all of you looking thin and undernourished because they aren't paying you enough. Well, that might get their attention. Even better, the local news might report on it, and your employers might be embarrassed into some sort of action.

If that still doesn't work, then do you push things a bit further? Do you perhaps try to stop trucks delivering to your factory? That would technically be illegal – blocking the public highway – but would a small illegal thing be OK, if the greater good was to get fair pay for everyone at the company? It's illegal, but you're stopping the traffic, not murdering children in their beds. Would that be OK? Well, that's what we are going to be exploring, today.

The government website for the new bill (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-factsheets/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-protest-powers-factsheet>) says:

Protests are an important part of our vibrant and tolerant democracy. Under human rights law, we all have the right to gather and express our views. But these rights are not absolute rights. That fact raises important questions for the police and wider society to consider about how much disruption is tolerable, and how to deal with protesters who

break the law. A fair balance should be struck between individual rights and the general interests of the community.

Having reviewed the evidence, our conclusion is that the police do not strike the right balance on every occasion. The balance may tip too readily in favour of protesters when – as is often the case – the police do not accurately assess the level of disruption caused, or likely to be caused, by a protest.

These and other observations led us to conclude that a modest reset of the scales is needed.

The point about balancing the scales is specifically made with reference to a group called XR (as well as some others).

The website goes on to say that during some protests in April and October 2019:

during Extinction Rebellion's protests of April and October 2019, some of London's busiest areas were brought to a standstill for several days. This had a disproportionate impact on commuters and small businesses, for example, with the policing operation for the two extended protests costing £37m



OK. Well. £37m is a lot of money. It is reasonable to think about the money and budgets involved. But it is also important to think about the impact which protesting has, about the role which it has to play in our democratic system. Not everyone wants to commit themselves to getting elected, but many people – perhaps most people – will agree that there are a few things that they feel really passionate about, and which they would want to ensure that our government pays attention to. Perhaps many of those people have actually been on a protest or taken part in a demonstration, or at least, perhaps signed a petition.

So, let's have a think about protests and demonstrations, and try to work out where the balance should be.

Let's start at the beginning, and look at XR as an example.

Have you heard of XR?

Actually, back up.

Have you heard that there are issues about the climate? That human activity is causing climate change? Have you heard that the changes are going to cause permanent changes to the environment, and that they are already creating changes such as to sea levels, to the ice caps, to glaciers, to people who live near to the sea, and to all of us as weather patterns change?

You probably have.

In fact, you have probably heard it referred to as a 'climate emergency'. What is meant by that is that there isn't much time left to do something about it. And by 'doing something about it', what is

actually meant is 'doing something to try to limit the effects of the changes'. Because we are already seeing changes.

Well, if you have heard of the term 'climate emergency', it may well be thanks to XR.

Who are XR, and when did this podcast turn into a discussion about climate change?

Well, the first part of that question is what we are here to discuss today.

The second part - when did this podcast turn into a discussion about climate change? – well, that isn't the case. We're not here to discuss climate change. But the discussion about climate change is certainly the background to why we are interested in XR.

So, why are we interested in XR?

Two reasons.

First, because XR, from a standing start about 4 or 5 years ago (perhaps the first time you might have heard about XR is when they successfully closed some bridges in London to vehicles [as was mentioned earlier, in that bit from the government website], and that was only in 2018), XR has made a pretty big political splash. And we are interested in looking at how XR has managed that. (Sneak preview here: Protest)

Second, because XR advocates the sort of possible tweak to our political processes which is absolutely central to this podcast. XR advocate the use of what is called a 'Citizen's Assembly'. And we will talk more about Citizen's Assemblies later, in our next episode.

First, though (and in this episode), let's have a little look at how XR have had an effect on our awareness of climate change as an issue which needs some attention, and some action.

What does XR stand for?

Well, the simple answer is 'Extinction Rebellion'.

(of course, that's not exactly accurate, because the word 'extinction' doesn't actually begin with the letter X – even if it begins with the sound 'X'. But you can understand why the two letters XR are a little more eye catching and dramatic: it works as a logo)

But, more than what the letters stand for, what does Extinction Rebellion stand for?

What does Extinction Rebellion want to achieve?



Well, here's the interesting thing. Extinction Rebellion both wants a lot and, at the same time, doesn't actually don't want very much. The members of XR want us to acknowledge that there is an issue (an issue with the way in which we are polluting the planet), and they want us to take that issue seriously. And since our governments and our institutions – and, perhaps, to some extent, we ourselves – haven't been very good at taking the seriousness of climate change as ... well ... as seriously as we should do, the members of XR are really trying to make us pay attention and take it all seriously. But – and here's the interesting bit – they don't actually have a preferred solution as to what action *should* be taken. Except that they want action to be taken now. Or very, very, very soon after now.

So, let's unpack that.

XR has three demands. We'll look at those in a moment. What XR does is to try to cause disruption in order that the people and the government pays attention to those demands.

What sort of disruption? Well, peaceful protests. Lying down on bridges to stop the traffic. Disruption to get the attention of government (to disrupt the economy, because the economy is the only thing which governments appear to care about)

“And that is of course an economic nightmare for the government, and that is exactly what we wanted, because all the government cares about is the economy rights, their number one priority.”



That is Marijn from Extinction Rebellion



“Thank you so much for having us.

I'm Marijn van de Geer so I'm with Extinction Rebellion UK and have been since pretty much the beginning when there was only about 30 of us, meeting in in various places and thinking, yeah, let's, let's start Rebellion.

Will anyone show up?

Will anyone join us?”

Has it always gone smoothly?

No. And it is probably the case that every member of XR is at least a little bit uncomfortable about at least one of the actions which have been taken in the name of XR. Because there isn't a controlling, central body, where XR authorises and approves every action taken in its name. Sometimes, people just go out and do what they think is going to get other people's attention. And it doesn't always work out absolutely perfectly.

But, on the whole, it does.

It does get government attention.

It does get media attention.

And it does get our attention.

I'm not sure whether XR invented the term 'climate emergency', but there's a good chance that - if you have heard it - you heard it because of something which XR did.

Now, this is not the place to start discussing the environment. There are lots of places which already do that. And there are lots of scientists and international bodies which say that human activity is affecting the climate. The International Panel on Climate Change. The United Nations. The point here is not to discuss the climate change, and it is not to discuss what action should be taken. Even XR doesn't have a list of what action should be taken – XR just wants us to sit down and understand all the issues, and to decide together on what action we think should be taken. The point here is to discuss whether disruptive protests of the sort which XR has taken has been successful or not.

Because, as I said earlier, despite all the disruption, XR is actually a pretty moderate organisation. Let's look at why it seems reasonable to call XR 'moderate'

XR has 3 demands

There's a Climate emergency

1. Tell the truth
2. Act now
3. Be the change

We're agreed we're in a crisis and that's why you know that that's sort of, that's where we have Demand Number One: We just tell the truth.

Demand Number Two: Act now.

So, there's already that agreement.

There is an emergency.

We need to act now.

Demand Number Three: This is how we're going to do it.



<https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/demands/>

Now, before we even get to the demands, let's look at the attitude on the XR website:

"Our demands are rooted in love, care and a fundamental commitment to climate justice. The effects of the emergency are being felt now, and will continue to be disproportionately suffered by those who have done least to cause the crises. In the UK, we bear a particular responsibility to the Global Majority, and acknowledge and support the incredible work of the many organisations specialising in the specific issues related to justice."

Rooted in love, care, and a fundamental commitment to climate justice.

Doesn't sound particularly difficult or demanding, does it?

These don't sound like French farmers, dumping tyres outside the *Prefecture*, and then setting fire to them. These don't sound like rioters and looters in South London in the summer. Love, care, and being fair. It all sounds more like afternoon tea by the river than police barricades and riot shields! What's not to like?

Now, let's have a look at those three demands. Demands! That's a very, well, demanding word, isn't it? Perhaps we can find out what sort of trouble this XR is really up to, if we look at their *demands*. Well, not so much, actually.

What were those demands again?

We've got 3 demands:
Tell the truth,
Act now, and
Be the change

1. Tell the truth

~~"All institutions must communicate the danger we are in. We must be clear about the extreme cascading risks humanity now faces, the injustice this represents, its historic roots, and the urgent need for rapid political, social and economic change."~~

That seems pretty uncontroversial. I mean, we would all want to be told the truth about things, wouldn't we? But the point which XR makes is that governments and companies and large organisations haven't been publicising the challenges of Climate Change as much as they could or should have been doing.

You may have heard that – back in the mid-20th Century – it was pretty common knowledge among tobacco companies that smoking was bad for your health. But tobacco companies not only didn't publicise this; they actually tried to promote the idea that it was good for you, or that the stories about it being bad for you were fear mongering. I suppose this is a little bit like that now. Governments – working on getting re-elected, and on keeping people happy for another 5 years – are often not prepared to take on long-term challenges. Particularly if addressing those long-term challenges are going to mean that we might have to take on some belt-tightening, or adjust the way in which we live a bit. Governments calculate that they want the electors to feel good about themselves and about the world, so perhaps sometimes those governments don't always explain some of the big challenges facing us in the future.

So, that's more or less what XR means, when it says 'tell the truth'.

So it's: Tell the truth, which is basic (you would think) and that's also what the government committed and doing in Rio in 1992. So, in 1992 was a big UN summit. I mean, for some of the listeners, they think 1992 centuries ago.

Well, it is basically is.

And they said then that they would inform the people of their countries about how bad the situation or climate change was, and they never did it.

So that is the first demand is tell the truth.

Tell people how bad it is.

So it's for the government to tell the truth, but also the media and and everyone you know for education for everyone to say.

This situation is really, really bad.

It's not a little bit bad.

It's really, really bad.



OK. So, if the first demand is met (and although we are all a bit more aware of the challenges of Climate Change than we used to be, perhaps we are not yet so aware that we are ready to do something about it yet – or, at least, not ready to do *enough* about it to make enough of a difference), well, then there's the second demand. *Do something about it.*

2. Act now

“Every part of society must act now to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025 and begin protecting and repairing nature immediately. The whole of society must move into a new precautionary paradigm, where life is sacred and all are in service to ensuring its future.”

And then the second demand is act now, so the demand is to go to Zero emissions. You know it used to be “Net Zero”.

Kind of the debate around “Net Zero” versus Zero, but versus negative is sort of quite but its act now we have to stop emitting right now, and 2025 was decided on because that shows. According to the science, that is where we need to go and everyone was like, “Well, it's impossible. You're setting yourself up to fail.”

It doesn't matter. That is where we should be.

So that is what the demand should be.



And then, after that, there's the third demand.

3. Be the change

"We demand a culture of participation, fairness and transparency. The Government must create and be led by a Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice. Only the common sense of ordinary people will help us navigate the challenging decisions ahead."

The most important, but really generally we think for everyone the most important should be the third demand, which has gone through a bit of a change.

So, we'll go beyond politics.

So, go beyond party politics, and now it's called "Be the change".

But, essentially what it is, is a UK wide Citizens Assembly on climate and ecological justice, that decides with ordinary citizens who get randomly selected to take part that decides on how we are going to move forward.

We're going to look at Citizens' Assemblies in our next episode, but for now what is important to notice is that, XR doesn't actually have a particular list of things which XR believes should be done. XR simply wants us - and our government - to pay attention. To think about the issues. To learn about the issues. And then to take the best action we think, in the light of what we have learned about the issues. To take that action as soon as possible. Now, in fact.

But what action?

XR isn't telling us what to think.

XR is just encouraging us to think.



Most protests are along the lines of

What do we want?

Chocolate biscuits!

When do we want them?

With our cup of tea!

XR's protest is more along the lines of

What do we want?

People to think and to understand!

When do we want this?

Well, all the time, really, but as soon as possible would be great, please.

Everybody needs to be involved in the decision making on how we're going to do this, and only then will we get the robust decisions that we really, really need.

So, how has XR tried to encourage us to think?

Well, they could have put up billboards, or paid for radio advertising space. But what they have done is to hold protests – protests which have disrupted traffic, to get our attention. I suppose it is also fair to say that XR aren't that bothered about stopping cars, because they believe that cars are part of the problem. But the point isn't to stop you getting to your work, or to stop you from collecting your kids from school. The point may be to encourage you to think whether you could have done those things on foot. Or by bike. Or perhaps on public transport.

But the point is really just to get our attention.

To force us, and our government, to pay attention.

Is it fair to disrupt the traffic – in fact, to disrupt the economy, by disrupting the traffic – just to get us to pay attention? Great question! The answer from XR would be that yes, it is.

So, so the main method of Extinction Rebellion is civil disobedience, nonviolent direct action, so it's disrupting where it's going to affect the government the most. So, it's the economy. So, obviously April, well we first we did the five bridges back in 2018. Well, we blocked five bridges in central London and then in April 2019 and we, we blocked central London for two weeks.

And that is of course an economic nightmare for the government, and that is exactly what we wanted, because all the government cares about is the economy rights, their number one priority.

We hear it every single day. The economy, economy, economy.

So, what do we do? We stop the economy.

And it got their attention and that is that is the main priorities getting the attention. Getting this subject on the debating table.

People need to be thinking about this every single second of every single day.

This is the most important, the worst crisis we've ever faced.

So, it's civil disobedience, and the non-violent aspect is because obviously we don't believe in violence.

And, you can see their point. Governments have been meeting other governments and scientific experts in conferences about climate change for decades. They have known that something needs to be done. But although we have a few wind farms and a bit more solar energy, it is clear that the action which has been taken hasn't been sufficient.

As Marijn mentioned, about 1992 in Rio, you know there was a commitment by all these governments to keep their populations informed.

And also to they knew the effects.

Uh, they were.

Calling it climate change then, I mean, now it's a crisis.

If not, it's an emergency, but nobody done it.

That's Kathie

I'm Kathy and I'm the external coordinator for XR UK Citizens' Assembly Working Group and Marijn's the internal (coordinator), so she's my other half.



So, if you were someone like a member of XR. Someone who cared about an issue passionately - who cared about the future of life on the planet passionately, and who believed that there might be things we could do to save it - and who could see that not enough was being done - well, if you were that sort of person, how could you have got the attention of so many people, and of governments?

Perhaps by stopping the traffic?

Irritating, perhaps. But stopping you driving somewhere, through the middle of a major city, in a protest which was signalled to the police and to the press, so you could have chosen to take a different route, if your journey was really important (and, let's be clear, if you were driving an ambulance, trying to get to a hospital, I'm pretty sure that none of the XR protestors would stop you), well, all of that is an inconvenience. That's all. Yes, an irritation. But - even if it isn't climate change which is the thing which you are passionate about - perhaps you can understand why the XR protestors will feel that it is important that they do what they do, to ensure that we all pay attention.



Is it the best way to get our attention?

Perhaps not always.

I might lose some friends by saying this, but whilst I can understand stopping cars in the centre of London, I do think that sometimes action taken in the name of XR has been counterproductive. There was, for example, an instance where XR protestors stopped some public transport (a tube train). That might have been counterproductive: after all, the people who were trying to take public transport to work were already trying to do the right thing. They weren't using private cars. They were using public transport to get to work.

And if it is disruptive but counterproductive, then it might not be getting our attention in a way which will make us sympathetic to the message.

But, let's put that sort of thing down to an error. A miscalculation.

Let's not choose to judge the success of an organisation by something which wasn't absolutely perfect. We don't judge whether Roger Federer is a good tennis player by some of his unforced errors. We judge him by all the consistently good ones, and all the really amazing ones.

The main idea for XR – as it would be for any protest, for any organisation trying to get what they want us to think about, or to know, or to do – the main idea is to get attention.

And, on the whole, it works.

I think the April 2019 Rebellion really did change the discourse around climate and biodiversity, because before then we were still, not everyone, but the general public in the mainstream media was talking about climate change. Some people were still talking about global warming. We're talking, we weren't even talking about biodiversity loss at all. Really, not really, and I think April 2019 really changed. You can see, in the media, suddenly it was *climate crisis*, *climate emergency*, *biodiversity breakdown*, *ecological breakdown*. The language really changed, and although we haven't seen concrete change, we really haven't, so there's still (which is why we're going back on the streets on the 9th of April). There's still so much to be done, but the terminology has changed and the words may not seem important, but they are. Because there's a big difference between someone talking about *climate change* or *climate emergency*. So, I think that's changed a lot.

Protesting works.

It's a great part of our democratic system.

It's a way of ordinary people showing other ordinary people - and together showing the government - what we all really care about.

Stop the war!

Do something about the environment!

For people who are not a formal part of the elected government, protest is a way of getting attention for your message.

Without it, we wouldn't have unions standing up for working people, for example.

And, here's a very important point about the way in which XR organises protests: they are non-violent.

Marijn: We want everyone involved. We don't want barriers for people to join.

Uhm, so yeah it's nonviolent and also it creates a moral dilemma because you see, these peaceful hippies you know as they like to portray us sitting on the streets, not harming anyone, just being disruptive obviously.

And you get the police arresting people.

And it creates a dilemma, because the public is like, well, we understand what it is they're trying to do, yet they're being treated as criminals, even though they haven't done necessarily any, you know they're not stealing anything, they're not beating anyone up, but they are being treated like that, and it kind of shifts the compassion and the intention from the public to be more supportive of the rebels.

Whereas obviously if you're violent and scary, people aren't going.

Kathie: And I think sort of blocking the streets as we have done and we do, it makes people think, and what we need isn't just the politicians.

We need people. A lot of people

So, from a standing start, with successfully shutting down some bridges in central London in 2018, XR has got its message out there. Has XR been successful? Well, perhaps we are all increasingly aware of the challenges of climate change, and we are all increasingly aware that *something* needs to be done.

Has XR changed government policy? No. Well ... not yet.

Had XR raised our general awareness? Has it forced climate change up the agenda? The political agenda, but also your personal agenda? Has it encouraged you, me, and everyone to make at least some changes to the way we live? Well ... yes, yes, yes, and yes.

We might not all be at the point of doing quite as much as we could – or should – do, at least, not quite yet. But if we are further along than we were a few years ago, then at least part of the credit for that should go to XR, as well as to other organisations which are aiming for the same thing.

Because the third 'demand' from XR – well, a version of that has taken place already. There has been a Citizen's Assembly about the climate. It wasn't set up with exactly the same demanding parameters and urgency to take action which XR would have wanted.

Marijn:

We cannot support it. We have 3 demands and this doesn't meet those demands.

But it has happened. We will look at what is meant by a Citizens' Assembly, how it could work, and why XR weren't happy with the one which has taken place – next time.

Next time, we're going to look at the process which XR thinks we should use, to help us to think about what action we should take. A 'Citizens' Assembly'. That's when a group of people [perhaps 100] who are selected to represent a cross section of society [some old, some young, rich and poor, university educated and not, different genders, different political views] are brought together to learn all about an important issue [such as climate change], to make recommendations about what actions we should take [as individuals, and also as a country, and perhaps also as a country with an international or even maybe a global role to play in taking an influential lead], and for our government to pay attention. That's what we are going to look at next time.

For now, thank you for listening.

Thank you to Kathie Conn and Marijn van de Geer

Internal and External Coordinators for Citizens' Assembly Working Group for Extinction Rebellion UK



If you would like to have a look at transcripts of the podcast, including links to all of our sources and references, please go to www.talktogether.info, and follow the links to the Podcast from there. And, of course, if you would like to contact us – not least if you would like to share any ideas which you have about how we could make things better, or if there are any areas of how Politics is supposed to work, but why it isn't working – then please email us at any time on info@talktogether.info.

If you have enjoyed this podcast, then I hope that you will take the time to tell your friends. And perhaps you could also take a moment to give us a rating wherever you found us – that not only helps other people to find us; it also just really makes us feel appreciated. ☺

That would be great. Thank you.