

## Extinction Rebellion in Australia: Leaving It to the Students

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*The protestor of school age sported a placard featuring a distorted caricature of Australian prime minister, **Scott Morrison**: “Scomomo was liking it hot”. A glorious spring day, and a gathering was already fussing and buzzing outside the Victorian State Library and students were striking. The placard image was one that toasted both ways – looking “hot” for the purposes of appearance – the lace underwear, the high-heels; and also observing a climate heating the earth to a state of cooked oblivion.*

Australia’s Pentecostal Prime Minister was thousands of miles away in Washington DC, spending time with the Big Man Uncle Sam, journeying there happy to be amongst friends (mates, as he would say), fairly indifferent to the climate change protests that have registered across the globe. He had, after all, been elected on a platform sympathetic to renting the earth.

Morrison’s life is sorted in God’s grand if erratic plan, which tends to ignore matters of an environmental nature. Climate change is best left to the hysterics; that’s their business. God’s business is to forgive and move a bit of furniture around in anticipating the admission of more souls to the Kingdom of Heaven. Till that happens for the Bible Bashing here-and-now, coal and other fossil fuels are to be worshipped.

How countries have managed to cope with climate change is a smorgasbord of conflict and desperation. Since 2018, another message, sometimes shrill, sometimes steely and sober, has entered the debate: [Extinction Rebellion](#), a movement that began in the United Kingdom and remains focused on the message of climate emergency and immediate action. From being outré, it is now chic, the subject of petitions. We are frying, goes this message from the children, so listen. Embrace, then, such methods as non-violent direct action (NVDA) encouraged by one of the XR founders Roger Hallam. Embrace a platform, if at all possible, beyond politics.

Within months, the XR movement had made sufficient ripples [to impress](#) the Metropolitan Police commissioner, **Cressida Dick**, London’s **Mayor Sadiq Khan**, and various members of the House of Commons. In June, MPs [yielded](#) to a core demand of the protest group: convening a citizens’ assembly made up of representative samples of the British population to discuss climate change.

Academics, for one, have hopped onto the bandwagon of children driven protest centred on Swedish activist **Greta Thunberg**, suggesting that civil disobedience is something worthwhile. This is a good thing for some, given that many have suffered what Christian

Smith [described](#) in *The Chronicle Review* as a distinctly cloacal condition, the academic as a bullshit submerged citizen.

“BS is the university’s loss of capacity to grapple with life’s Big Questions, because of our crisis in faith in truth, reality, reason, evidence, argument, civility, and our common humanity.”

While a clear view on non-violent protest is absolutely tenable from a moral and ethical perspective, it is worth considering who tends to be roped into such measures. Henry David Thoreau’s 1849 [essay on civil disobedience](#) remains a canonical text for the effectual protester; it is not sufficient to be merely against a condition or state of society (slavery or war). A platform of activism is needed to “quietly declare war with the State”.

Many academics have no such compunction in battling it out with the State. Middle class welfare discourages that sort of thing. The first bastion of capitulation in most developed societies is the academic class. Its members are, all too frequently, the accommodators, the conciliators and the surrendering segment of society keen to prevent dissent in choppy waters. They are practitioners of sloth; skivers and shirkers, shifting workloads to adjuncts and sessional staff. Failed academics become, in time, failed managers.

When it comes to the thinking and Thoreau-like matters of disobedience, the heavy lifting, running, and all-round angst is best left to students, however salad-like they might seem. Otherwise, the focus tends to be confined to collective signatures that never go much further than a round robin email of conceited smugness and organisational dullness.

In Australia, [an open letter](#) signed by some 250 or so researchers and those loosely defined as members of the academic fraternity (the context is now so diluted as to be meaningless) have expressed their “support or the Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement and the global week of non-violent civil disobedience and disruption planned for October.” The language is a bit Johnny-come-lately, an after-party intervention that sounds like the bore who cheered after the fact. “We stand behind XR’s demands for the Australian government to declare a climate emergency and to establish a citizens’ assembly to work with scientists on the basis of current evidence to develop a credible and just plan for rapid total decarbonisation of the economy.”

Important to also note here is the tribalism behind the note: university disciplines chirping and bleating in an effort to identify some fictional solidarity lurking behind the impotence. The children had saved them; they could be relevant!

Given that the modern university is heaving and suffering under siloed hyper-specialised irrelevance, this must have come as a golden opportunity for ineffectual hivers keen to boost their presence and their value before the unalerted public eye. It gave managers a chance to leave their spreadsheets and signatures; it gave the lazed and the crazed a chance to rope in a protest march and badger high school students.

It was also a chance to be righteous, encouraging, in the words of the open letter, “all Australian universities and other major institutions to immediately divest funds from all fossil fuel and other industries which are contributing to the climate crisis, and to redirect investments urgently towards the renewable energy sector and other climate enhancing technologies.” (Climate is already being “enhanced” enough as it is; what is needed, surely,

are technologies that moderate that enhancement.)

The protests on this September 20, filled as they are with children, many tenaciously bright, do leave one with a sense of returned relevance: the civil disobedient class as resurgent, the activist as debater. But history shows that the students are best left alone to inspire and convince: despots, instructors and the military will eventually follow.

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