

A CLIMATE OF FEAR AND INSECURITY



The police 'swoop' on climate change protestors in Nottingham had an air of the surreal about it. Some 200 police officers, dozens of dogs and a cavalcade of police vans descended on a school site, in the dead of night, to conduct Britain's largest pre-emptive arrest in living memory.

Neighbours thought it was a major terrorist incident or, at the very least, the breaking up of an international crime network. In reality, the 114 people arrested may be closer to al-IKEA than al-Qaida – a self-assembly group of climate change campaigners, planning another protest at the Ratcliffe power station. The questions that hang in the air are whether the scale of the police operation, or the damage they themselves have done, justifies the pre-emptive disruption of the protest?

I only happen to know about the damage because my daughter goes to the nursery at the school. Parents were called to say the nursery was closed till further notice. Doors had been smashed in and glass trodden throughout the carpeted play area. Obviously not a safe environment for the pre-school plotters whose closest connection to direct action might be water colour painting.

I subsequently discovered that the police had smashed their way into every part of the school, even though climate change activists were gathered in an unused wing adjacent to the school. Suddenly, it started to look clumsy and heavy handed; an operation conceived by people who spend too much time watching American police movies. I found myself drawn more to this view after a radio interview in which the police representative justified the pre-emptive arrests on the basis that they saved the police and the energy company considerable cost, had the direct action gone ahead.

At this stage none of us know what the 'action' plans were. Presumably, this will all come out in court...if it ever gets to court. The trouble with pre-emptive arrests is that you don't have a crime. Nor do the police have much success in getting convictions in such 'conspiracy to trespass' cases. Having been involved in a number of mass trespass activities, I must record, that I've had the most enormous difficulties in getting arrested and charged. Most times the police simply told me to push off, as they had more important crimes to address. Quite right.

Maybe the power station protestors had something more serious in mind. But if the police had already infiltrated the group, the trick is to catch them in the act. Only major acts of international terrorism justify pre-emptive arrests. Otherwise we enter the Orwellian world of thought crimes and the closed society. No freedom of assembly. No right to challenge something deeply damaging to society. Everything can be outlawed because of the 'possibility' of violence.

I have no idea of the protestors' plans, and would certainly offer no blank cheque endorsement of any plan to destroy buildings or take other people's lives. But on the issue of coal fired power stations the protestors are right. Their carbon emissions will kill us all. In the future, we will use coal for its chemicals not its combustion. Energy companies know that carbon capture and storage is a delusion. I

stand more chance of walking on the moon than seeing complete carbon capture and storage working in UK power stations. This is why energy companies lobbied so hard to ensure the government did not make this a condition attached to the proposed Kingsnorth power station.

As politicians, we do not grasp the urgency of scientific warnings about how little time we have left, to radically transform our whole thinking about sustainable energy systems. Inevitably, this leaves the challenge to be picked up by the public rather than by parliament. In doing so, it just doesn't help if we end up locking up those who would save the planet rather than those who drive us into climate crisis.

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