

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 108

February 2020

Strategies of GT and XR in the New Climate Movement

This issue is devoted to Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion. I argue that although both Greta Thunberg and the school strikes and Extinction Rebellion have achieved great things, if that success is to continue and bring about real change in terms of hastening the end of climate pollution, their strategies need to change, and in particular, that of XR. [What follows is based on XR UK - how much it applies elsewhere I do not know].

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Tragedy Or Scandal?

Strategies Of GT, XR and the New Climate Movement

February 2020

I've published a paper (above - download it from a blog [here](#)) taking a look at 'XR' and 'GT' from a campaign strategy point of view.

Among many other things, argues for more alignment between the efforts of the 'new climate movement' as represented by Greta Thunberg and the school strikes (#fridaysforfuture) and Extinction Rebellion, and 'mainstream' NGO campaigns and other efforts to tackle the climate crisis. In practice this means a relatively minor change to the narrative of Greta Thunberg - I suggest dropping or modifying the "no one is doing anything" mantra - but a significant change to XR's strategy, at least as adopted in the UK in 2018-19.

In my view a central reason to make a change is that governments, corporates and others already have the means to enact far more radical and often immediate cuts to climate-changing pollution but they are not using them enough, consistently or in some cases, at all. This makes it a 'scandal', because the damage is avoidable. Yet for its own reasons of wanting to drive a rebellion against government before getting round to 'cutting carbon', XR has neglected to mention that solutions exist and sometimes denied them outright. Which means it cannot use the power of scandals to drive change.

This revolutionary pathway hides from XR supporters in plain sight. It's not obvious from the topline narrative of climate emergency, tell the truth (based on the science), and act like it's true but it is there in XR's public statements.

However it's likely that most of those who flocked to support XR in 2018 and 2019 had no idea of the revolutionary fine print and were simply motivated by alarm about climate change.

An awful thing without a solution is a tragedy, as nothing can be done about it.

Until XR focuses on more specific targets with direct leverage over policy and practice that cuts emissions (rather than generalised disruption to make the country ungovernable), its strategy will not really have changed from tragedy to scandal. And while tragedy invokes grief, anxiety and depression, as journalist Julie Beck pointed out "anxiety is not a prerequisite for action". Which for an activist organisation is strange.

Different Strategies

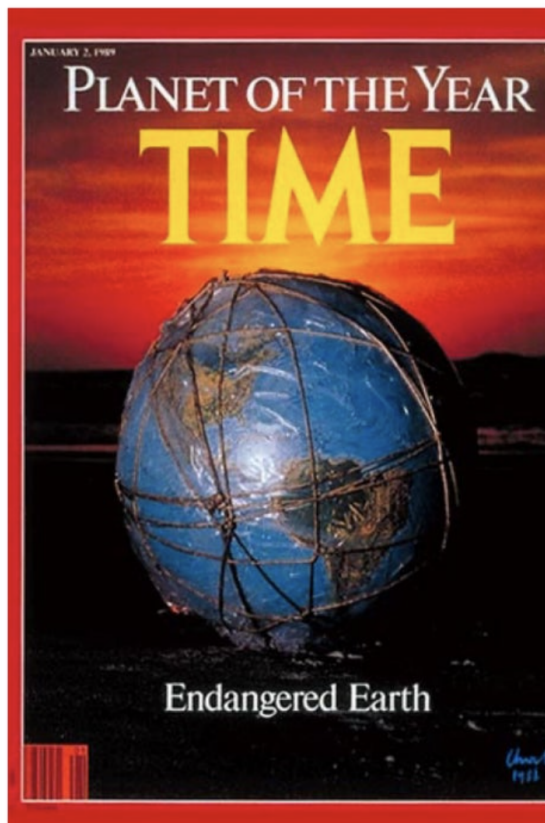
Although the two may appear to be part of the same enterprise, with Greta T appearing at XR events and vice versa, in reality they have had very different strategies. Thunberg's part of the movement sticks closely to the science as represented by the IPCC, in other words the assessment of the crisis accepted by governments, and uses protest, advocacy and public pressure to call for governments to take action in line with reducing emissions so we have an odds-on chance of staying below 2.C rise in global temperature and preferably 1.5.C.

In contrast, XR's strategy is actually based on a theory of revolution and its objective, in the UK at any rate, has been to get sufficient participation in disruptive 'rebellions', to bring down the government or force it to accede to XR's demands. Some at least in XR may always have been more intent on using climate as cause which will get air time and commitment for overthrowing 'neoliberal regimes', than simply 'stopping climate change'.

In my view the power of GT's strategy has been provided by the emotional leverage that children exert over parents and grandparents, shaming an older generation into rethinking their response, or lack of it, to the climate crisis.

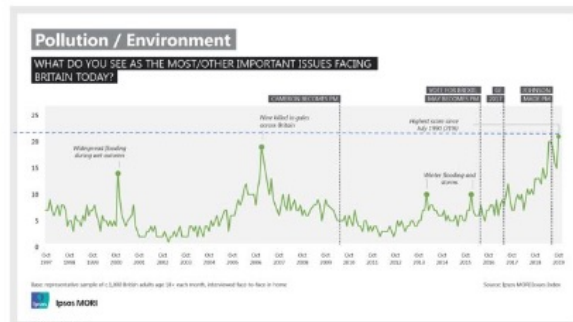
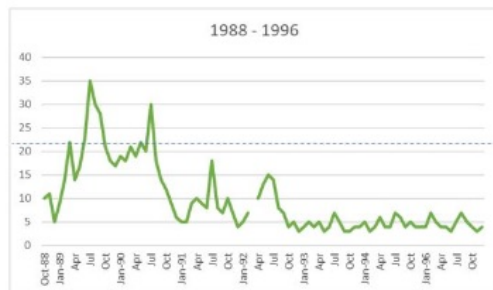


'Being a parent' is a powerful identity factor across values groups (see paper). Greta Thunberg also re-framed climate change, from something happening to the planet, to something happening to children - personification. (Below - Planet of the Year in 1988, Person of the Year 2019).



At a global level, Greta Thunberg has had a far greater impact on popular awareness than Extinction Rebellion but in the countries where it has been

most active (eg the UK and Australia) the latter has created disruptive and intrusive events which have helped keep the climate crisis on the political agenda.



UK public concern about the environment has been rising to 'unprecedented' and 'record' levels (press coverage of IPSOS MORI tracker and others - details in paper) but if you look further back, they were in fact higher in the previous 'green wave' around 1988-90. Although often attributed to XR and GT (including by XR itself), the current 'green wave' actually started climbing about 2014 and like the 1988-90 wave and the 1968-1971 wave before it, has been driven mainly by concern at real-world events rather than activism. A major issue for GT, XR and NGOs now, is what political legacy they manage to secure from the current wave. The last one was something of a missed opportunity, and not just on climate change.



Former spinach farmer and radical activist turned sociology researcher, [Roger Hallam](#) in a 2019 video

(If video does not load link [here](#) - 5 mins).

XR cites a lot of mainstream climate science - models and observations of real events - which could hardly be more alarming but it seems to me that in its desire to push up the sense of alarm, and recruit participants to its rebellions, it has sometimes exaggerated imminence and converted possibilities into predictions, as well as failing to distinguish between high confidence science and speculation, including by non scientists.

Extinction Rebellion founder Roger Hallam has particularly attracted attention and criticism but several leading lights in XR have made similar remarks, particularly pinning 'facts' (which sometimes were not facts) to the fate of children alive today.

In the above video, Hallam says:

[“Our children are going to die in the next ten to twenty years: think about it. And then think about it again. And think about it again until you cry. And get up in the morning and do your duty to your kids and get out there. We’re not playing games. It’s not a game.”](#)

Fellow founder Gail Bradbrook told Reuters:

“Has it landed with you that your kids probably [won’t have enough food to eat](#) in a few years’ time?”

And to criticism from climate scientists, philosophy academic and XR thinker Rupert Read said [to children in London](#):

‘You are in a terrible predicament It’s worse than you’ve been told almost certainly, probably a lot worse. Dangerous climate change and the extinction crisis - the crisis of many many species going extinct as we speak - if they’re not stopped will mean that you do not have normal lives like your parents have. This is about whether you have a future. People probably sometimes ask you what are you going to be when you grow up but we’ve reached a point in human history where the question also has to be asked, ‘what are you going to do if you grow up?’

In my view, XR's attempts to portray a near-term threat from climate change to the lives of children is less politically effective than the appeals of GT and the school strikers themselves. I also think it's unethical and could damage people's mental health, particularly the young. But by trying to pin their definitive claims on 'scientific facts', XR also un-necessarily exposes itself to being proved wrong on particulars, as in Hallam's interview with Stephen Sackur of the BBC in which he stated that *“I am talking about the slaughter, death and starvation of six billion people this century. That's what the science predicts ...”* ([video here](#), transcript [here](#)). The BBC's fact checking programme subsequently concluded that he 'made it up'.

XR could have insulated itself against such a risk if it had claimed that it 'feared' or 'believed' that six billion would die - it was the attempt to revise the science that was the problem.



"And the truth is we are basically not doing anything" Greta ...



Extinction Rebellion: Unless we disrupt nothing happens

Extinction Rebellion FACING REALITY – LACK OF ANY MEANINGFUL ACTION

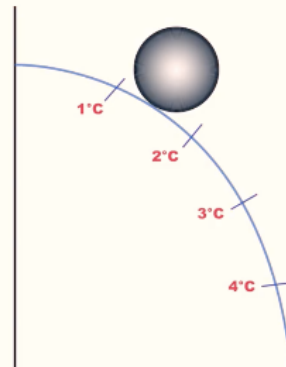
First IPCC report was in 1990 – 28 years ago

UN warned us then to keep temp rises to 1°C or face societal collapse

CO₂ levels 60% higher than in 1990

Still rising, methane even more so

At some point soon we can't reverse problems - they runaway from us



In my view a more serious criticism of XR's strategy is the way it systematically denies the existence of solutions. Both XR and GT frequently assert that 'nothing is being done' and in the paper I argue that this is a line they should retire. At one level it's just plainly ridiculous. If nobody had been doing anything, there would be no electric cars to transport GT to events but it's a more substantive issue than that.

XR's extensive quoting from scientific papers is very selective. Not so much cherry picking between papers as 'gloom picking' within them. It systematically cites the alarming bits about trajectories and tipping points for instance (eg example Rockstrom's and Ramanathan's work) while omitting any reference to what they have to say about the feasibility of avoiding catastrophe. More than that, XR's emphasis on gloom is underpinned by a pre-existing objection (inherited from its parent group RisingUp!) to what it calls 'positivity'. It has called on Greenpeace for example, to give up 'positivity'.

The reason for this is that if people have hope that there problem is soluble by other means, they won't want to support a 'rebellion' and may therefore not wish to offer themselves as 'rebels' willing to get arrested. (As I describe in the paper, this has been the subject of criticism from other activists who point to their own experiences with the very negative consequences that can follow from arrest and jail time).

As well as the subtle but consistent failure to mention or recommend supporting renewable energy or other solutions paths in its narrative and materials, XR has also been explicit in solutions-denial. For instance in Hallam's interview with Sackur:

Stephen Sackur:

“There are many scientists who actually will not just focus on the negative, the bleak and the dark but will say, you know what we human beings are making some progress, we are cutting emissions, for example in the energy sector”.

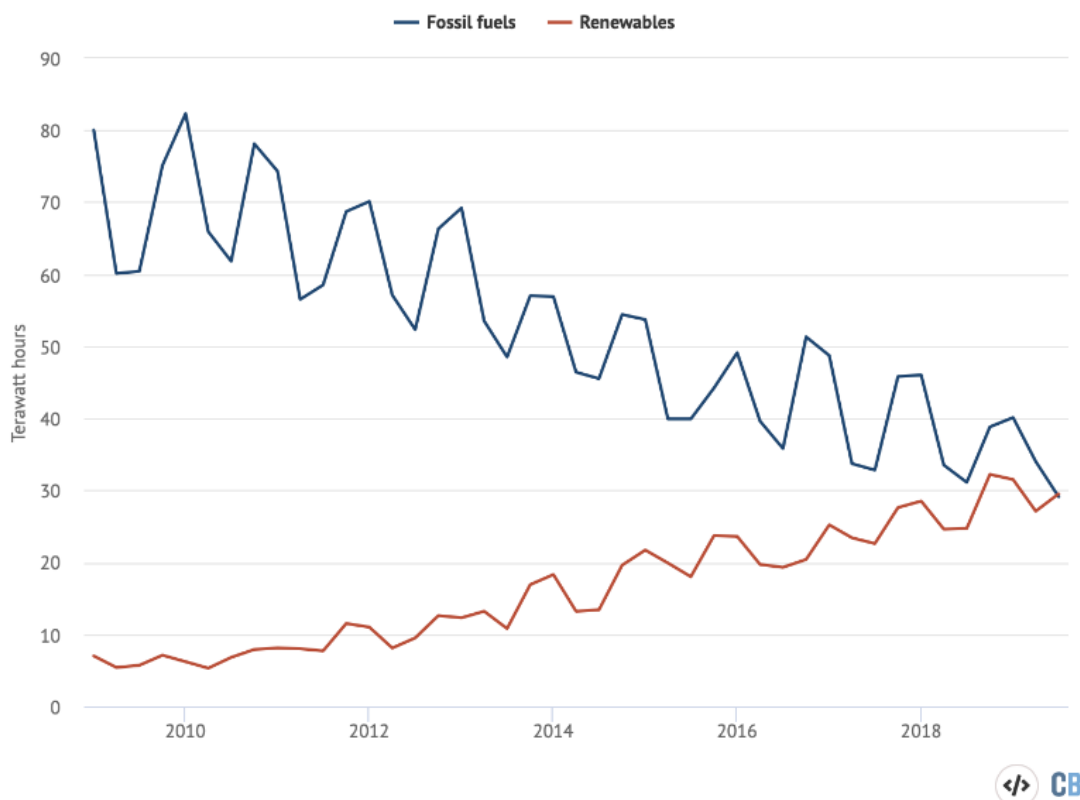
To which Hallam replied:

“I've just told you that's total nonsense, it's total nonsense, you shouldn't be saying it”.

But it's not nonsense.

UK renewables generated more electricity than fossil fuels for the first time

The third quarter of 2019 was the first ever to see this switch



The dramatic 'decarbonisation' of the UK's electricity sector is one example (see Carbon Brief analysis above showing renewable overtaking fossil fuel electricity generation in 2019). Bear in mind that XR-UK is campaigning in the UK.

Analyses published by Carbon Brief show that the overall UK carbon footprint including emissions 'imported' by trade was at its [lowest level for 20 years in 2016](#), having fallen 10% since 1997, that renewables generated more electricity than fossil fuels for the first time [in 2019](#), that in 2018 [primary energy use was the lowest in half a century](#), and that UK land based carbon dioxide emissions were [51% less by 2017 than they would have been if nothing had been done](#), had we had remained on a Business as Usual path since 1990. In relation to its obligations under the Climate Change Act, UK net emissions of greenhouse gases (expressed as carbon dioxide equivalent) have dropped 42% since 1990.

Yet XR says 'nothing meaningful' has been done, and Hallam dismisses

renewables as 'tinkering'. This makes for a dramatic black and white story.

The only trouble is, a huge number of people, including everyone working on it in government and business, know that it is wrong. Except perhaps, many of the people new to climate activism who have been attracted to XR and may rely on it for information?

XR repeatedly states that emissions have increased 60% since 1990 but fails to make clear that this refers to global emissions, not UK emissions. So XR is being misleading. Which does not help campaigns to address the climate crisis in practical terms.

Except, XR has also set itself against campaigns which it dismisses as 'failed'.

Hallam has said "environmentalism has been a complete disaster", and co-founder Robin Boardman: "for 30 years, NGOs have basically failed to do anything serious".

Which might come as a surprise to Friends of the Earth which was responsible for the UK Climate Change Act that came into force in 2008, and groups like 350 (a major supporter of GT) and the grass-roots student network People and Planet, the main force behind the decisions of 74 UK universities to divest from fossil fuels. Ironically Hallam was involved in one student divestment campaign which XR uses as a 'proof' of its escalating mass civil resistance strategy and lays claim to two more but the rest were conducted using the 'failed' tactics of what XR derides as 'ordinary' campaigns.

Now we know: conventional campaigning won't prevent our extinction

Roger Hallam

I helped to found Extinction Rebellion because only non-violent civil disobedience will stop the destruction of our natural world

Wed 1 May 2019 10.05 BST



2,000



As well as the total failure of NGO campaigns to make any significant difference, XR's narrative repeatedly asserts that politics has failed. This it puts down to 'neoliberalism', and Bradbrook argues that it doesn't matter which way you vote, you get the same 'neoliberal' result (NGO campaigns are also 'neoliberal' according to XR as they are not revolutionary).

In his 2019 book 'Common Sense for the Twenty-first Century', which lays out in some detail the strategy then adopted by XR, Roger Hallam states: *"the world's present political systems have facilitated a 60% increase in global emissions since the beginning of the crisis in 1990 and have no ability to stop a continued rise in CO2"*.

That doesn't explain how a succession of different UK governments presided over radical carbon cutting from electricity generation. And also in 2019 a [study in the Nature Climate Change](#), found that while CO2 was rising globally, in 18 countries developing renewables and 'moving away from fossil fuels', emissions were falling. Together these countries accounted for 28 per cent of global emissions. Corinne Le Quéré, from the UK's University of East Anglia [told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation](#), "we found that, in the countries where there's more policy in place, the decreases in emissions were larger ... that suggests that the policies do work."

So if they 'put their shoulder to the wheel', governments can make the necessary difference, and there is growing evidence from many more countries, that this is the case. Here are the 18:

Many countries in Europe, and the US, have **decreased their emissions from fossil fuels**, mostly with energy efficiency and demand reduction



Many more mitigation **opportunities exist in transport**



Many mitigation **opportunities exist for consumer-facing innovations**



Credits: C Le Quéré (UEA), M Sharmina (University of Manchester), C Wilson (UEA), L Whitmarsh (Cardiff).
Data: van Vuuren 2017 and the Global Carbon Budget. Design by Asher Minns. Graphics by Nigel Hawtin

Tyndall Centre **UEA**
for Climate Change Research

Is this enough? No of course it isn't, as I explore more in the paper.

In 2019 global carbon emissions flatlined rather than rising, which is good news

although that's happened before and then they increased. But structural changes and economics (eg falling costs of new renewables making them cheaper than new coal power in China and India) are encouraging. On the other hand, real-world climate change is pushing at biological and physical tipping points making the race between climate catastrophe and climate solutions neck and neck.

The question is what gives us the best chance of speeding up action by government, business and communities to eliminate climate pollution? Is it XR's revolutionary pathway ?

ACT NOW

We are unprepared for the danger our future holds. We face floods, wildfires, extreme weather, crop failure, mass displacement and the breakdown of society. The time for denial is over. It is time to act.

Conventional approaches of voting, lobbying, petitions and protest have failed because powerful political and economic interests prevent change. Our strategy is therefore one of non-violent, disruptive civil disobedience – a rebellion.

Historical evidence shows that we need the involvement of 3.5% of the population to succeed – in the UK that's about 2 million people.

The box above, from XR's website, summarises the case for rebellion.

Everything has failed so revolution is the only option. And fortunately 'historical evidence shows' we 'only' need 3.5% of the population to join sustained mass civil resistance (which means blocking roads and so on in order to cause such disruption and economic cost that the government falls), for success to be inevitable.

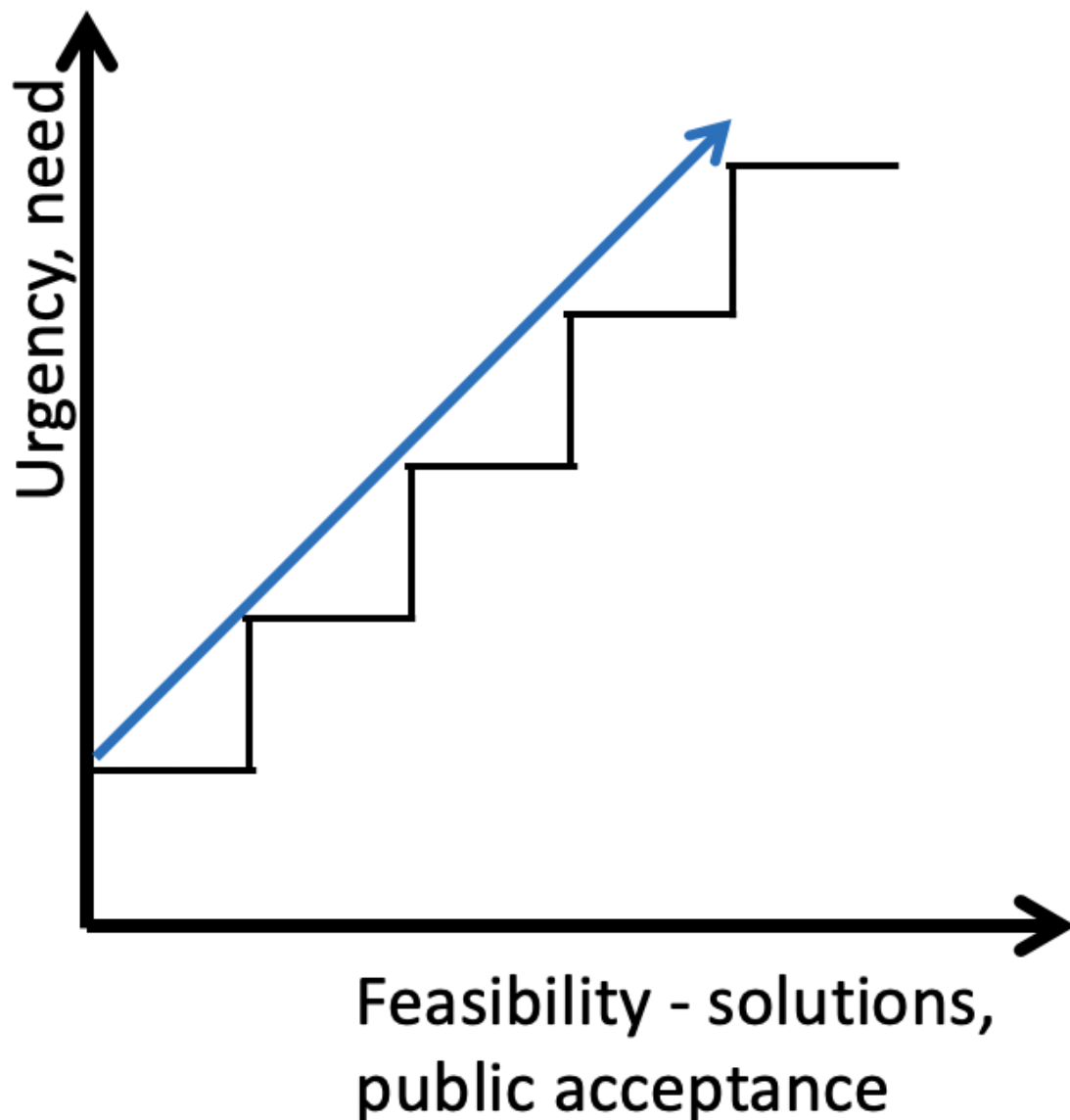
This pivotal 'Theory of Change' assertion by XR is based on work by Roger

Hallam. It derives from a study by American political scientist Erica Chenoweth who famously compared the relative success rates of violent and non-violent revolutions. She found that non-violent ones were much more successful and few if any failed if they reached this magical 3.5% participation. What struck me and others is that the cases she looked at were all from revolutions attempted against totalitarian regimes or dictatorships. None were against democracies (and were often attempts to get democracy or self determination).

Yet XR operates in democratic countries like the UK which already have a free press and social media, politics and campaigns. The existence of these ways of expressing views and the avenues for change that they offer, mean XR's pathway plan to overthrowing the government, and replacing it with 'Citizens Assemblies' which will then be 'facilitated' to decide on a radical restructuring of both climate policies and democracy itself (somewhat vague that bit), rests on heroic and rather shaky assumptions.

There are already signs that XR's disruption tactics (for example at Canning Town and more recently in Cambridge) can create a backlash from local people who do not see the change-logic of actions that, for instance, block commuter tube trains or bus lanes, even though the great majority of the UK population supports more climate action.

This is discussed at greater length in 'Tragedy or Scandal' but it is the root cause of why XR denies solutions, actively dismisses campaigns (and has tried to bully NGOs into supporting the revolution), dismisses politics as incapable of making a difference, and not only emphasises gloom but has promoted grief and climate anxiety (to create rage and despair thereby lowering the entry barriers to participation in rebellion and arrest as 'we have nothing to lose').



In my book [How to Win Campaigns](#) (2010) I put forward a simple model (above) of how change in 'issues' and individual long running campaigns very often proceed step-wise, in alternating problem phases and solution phases. Instrumental change (blue arrow) comes about by the resolution of these two forces.

In the problem phase, problem driving 'works' as there is a deficit of urgency or perceived need to act (classically by politicians), for instance because not enough people care, or the right groups of people, etc.. XR and GT have successfully devoted themselves to this, and their actions coupled with real-world events such as melting ice and chaotic extreme weather, have pushed up

the urgency signal: ringing the alarm bell.

Governments and corporates (and individuals and communities) may say 'we've got the message' but to turn that into maximum change now requires proof of feasibility, which includes demonstrating that they are not doing all they could do (scandals). It also includes demonstrating political feasibility (public acceptance of change, the will to change, as well as public urging or demanding 'change').

UK examples would include the mothballing of new onshore wind projects - release them - and basic but effective in the short term measures, like speed limits, new bus lanes and energy efficiency in buildings.

This is where GT and XR could work much more with other actors such as NGOs, the green tech industry and greenish politicians, who on the one hand are much more embedded in the technical worlds of solutions know-how, and on the other, have networks of trust with large parts of the population and so are able to organise signals of acceptance by leadership, for example individuals and communities implementing change such as electrification of transport choices and systems, and changing diet.

After a while, when a wave of implementation has occurred, solutions-driving starts to have less effect and it's necessary to return to driving urgency, raising ambition. But ambition is also calibrated by imagination and that in turn relies on knowledge of what's possible.

Next Steps ?



Above: XR Norwich 'red rebels' coming ashore after visiting Wells next the Sea (where I live) to 'raise awareness' about sea-level rise just before Christmas last year. We get flooded here fairly frequently.

Will XR change? It's recently produced a new strategy document but it is very general and it's not clear whether it is planning to go beyond 'ringing the alarm bell', or whether it is still bent on pursuing the revolutionary pathway developed by Roger Hallam and others. If so, in my view, it's trapped in a bad case of path dependency of the type that it has criticised in others. Some leading figures in XR have raised questions about the applicability of the magic 3.5% but any credible new strategy would need to be equally clear.

Can XR change ? That may be an even more difficult problem. Unlike some earlier UK activist movements such as the 1990s Roads Protests, XR is carefully branded and its central communications have been cleverly constructed to support the revolutionary strategy of alarming potential followers, indoctrinating them to ignore solutions and NGO campaigns and politics, and then organising them by using various sometimes culty techniques, to become committed rebels. Undoing that may be a challenge.

But by adopting a decentralised and essentially open movement system which anyone can assign themselves to by just declaring that they act in line with its ten principles, XR has very little in the way of a directing structure. Presumably

a shift to a new strategy would require a theological-style new doctrine and metaphorically, a laying on of hands by charismatic new thought-leaders.

Meanwhile those of a more anarchic leaning attracted to this populist movement may wear public patience thin if they persist in what people see as disruption for its own sake. In terms of changing itself, XR may now be in its own private race against time.

For my part I hope XR survives for we need it, as we do GT and her #fridaysforfuture. Better alignment with the efforts of the climate-crisis fighting mainstream, if not necessarily close organisation, would be the optimal result. (For more thoughts on what needs to be done including a complementary movement to make best use of disposable incomes, [see the paper here](#)).

Climate Solutions

Recommended Book and Email Newsletters

I've not finished it yet but if you are interested in solutions to the climate crisis I recommend Chris Goodall's new book "What We Need To Do Now", and his excellent weekly free Carbon Commentary email. It's a very direct line into the extraordinary amount of innovation and application going on in the field of climate solutions, with strong emphasis on energy systems.

See Chris's website: <https://www.carboncommentary.com>

What We Need To Do Now

About the book

The newspapers are full of articles on climate breakdown, as well the ways in which our daily lives are adding to greenhouse gas emissions. It seems an impossibly complicated subject.

What We Need To Now is a short hardback book that offers a set of solutions to each of the main challenges posed by global heating. Of course it covers energy supply but also has chapters on housing, food, clothing and the main manufacturing problem areas, such as cement and steel. It finishes by looking briefly at the opportunities for direct capture of CO2 from air and the possible benefits and costs of tinkering with the reflectivity of the Earth's atmosphere.

Three themes dominate the book. First, the world - and specifically the UK - needs to take action across almost all parts of the economy. Electricity supply, which has been our almost exclusive focus until now, isn't going to be remotely sufficient. We won't get to 'net zero' without a plan that covers almost every type of human activity. Second, energy is actually relatively easy to decarbonise while sectors such as aviation and cotton manufacture are highly complex, problematic challenges. Third, widespread action across almost human activities is going to require an unprecedented political consensus. Hence the need for 'Green New Deal' that ensures that the less well-off actually benefit strongly from the actions societies take on

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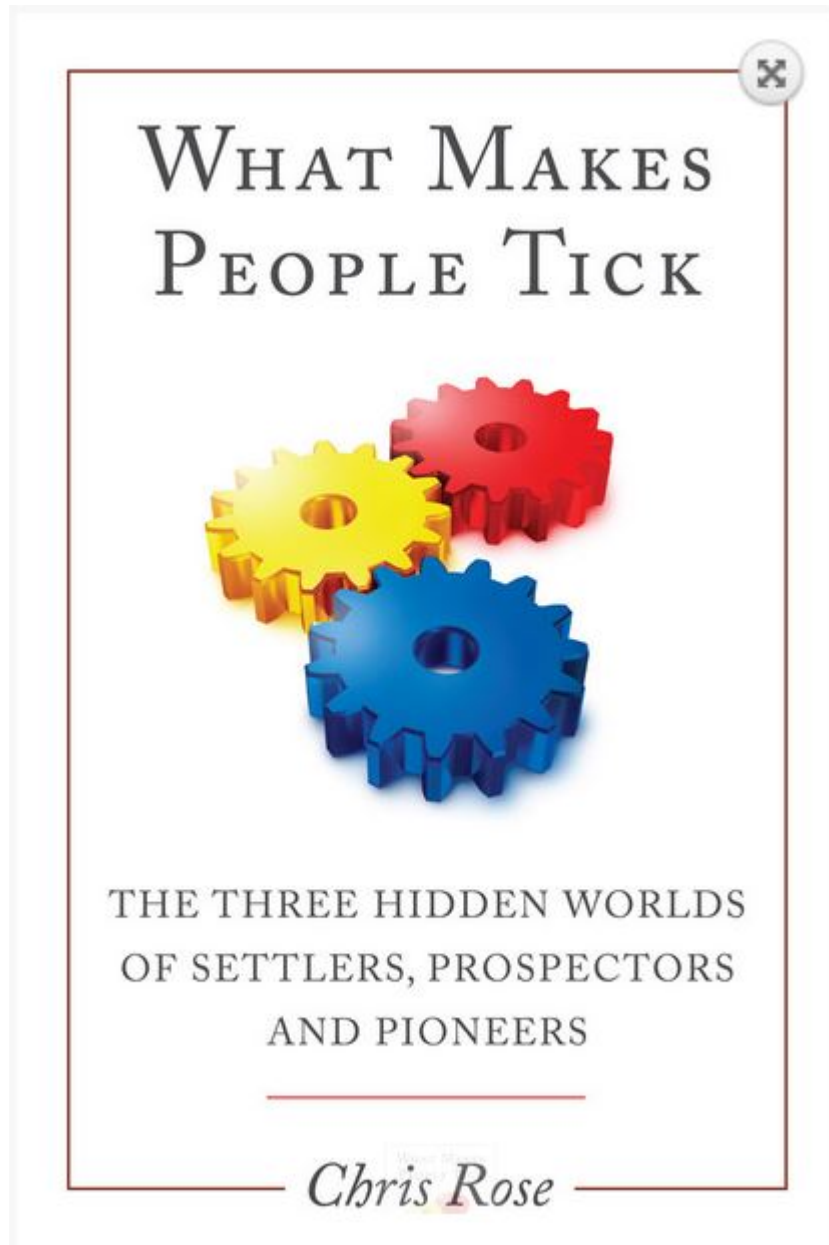
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Also promising is Adam Vaughan's new project: the [Fix The Planet Newsletter](#). Adam is chief reporter at New Scientist magazine.

If I had to pick one other it would be the evergreen US-based [Grist Magazine](#) which pithily covers the waterfront of environmental issues and rightly describes itself as 'A Beacon in The Smog'.

Finally, find many examples of rapid transition at <https://www.rapidtransition.org>



If you are interested in reading about motivational values you can order a single copy of *What Makes People Tick: The Three Hidden Worlds of Settlers, Prospectors and Pioneers* preferably direct from me [here](#), or find it on Amazon in which case they get lots of the money. Discount for bulk orders - [contact me](#).

Find my book [How to Win Campaigns: Communications for Change](#) at booksellers

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