



Billy Bragg, Geoff Barrow and others defend XR protestors

July 2019

Musicians Billy Bragg and Geoff Barrow have praised activists and defended the Extinction Rebellion 'Summer Uprising' that saw thousands take to the streets and shut down 5 city centres in July.

I spoke to both of them and lots of local people regarding the Bristol protests, amid complaints from a few on social media and the BBC, who thought the campaign methods were causing too much disruption to ordinary people.

Here is a [video link](#) with some of Billy's powerful message on why he believes this movement matters so much. Geoff Barrow, from the bands Portishead and Beak, also stood up for the protestors amid criticisms. Geoff and his band performed on Bristol Bridge during the week long XR occupation of the city centre. Geoff's views are shared below.

Addressing hundreds of people on College Green, as a guest of Bristol Extinction Rebellion Youth, Billy defended them for standing up to power and demanding accountability. Between songs, he made a compelling speech on privilege, abuse of power, free speech and how we use or misuse freedom.

Billy described the rapid rise and empowerment of young people he has witnessed in this new movement as being “the new punk rock,” and said it reminded him of the miners’ strikes back in the 1980s.



He said: “The empowerment aspect of XR Youth, Extinction Rebellion and the school strikes really inspires me. What really excites me is that I think this is the new punk rock. And it’s not about trousers or hair cuts. Punk rock, when I was 19, was all about self-empowerment.

“Deciding what you wanted to do and going out and doing it, whatever people said. No one invited you to be a punk or instructed you how. Obviously there were some great trousers involved as well. The self empowerment aspect of XR Youth is something that really, really inspires me.”

After joining hundreds of people for a march through the city centre from Bristol Bridge - occupied by the campaigners with their famous pink boat - he told the crowd: “You are not the first people who have fought these fights. By standing for Extinction Rebellion you are joining a long tradition of people who have struggled for a better world. And we welcome you.”



ACCOUNTABILITY

Billy added: "What we are doing here today is not in isolation in Bristol or in the UK, and not in isolation within the environmental movement. What we are fighting for, absolute bottom line, is accountability. The absolute power of monarchy has now been replaced with the absolute power of neoliberalism and capitalism... We are up against corporations that don't recognise citizens, they don't recognise nations, borders, they don't recognise nothing except the bottom line and nothing will stand in the way of that bottom line."

FREE SPEECH

"And we are fighting against free speech warriors who believe that the definition of freedom is to be able to say whatever you want, whenever you want to whoever you want, with no come back. If that is a definition of freedom then we need to look no further than Donald's Trump's Twitter feed... That is bullshit and you know it.

"What Trump lacks is the other dimensions of freedom that are crucial if everybody is going to enjoy the fruits of liberty – he has no idea about equality. Boris Johnson is exactly the same. They have no respect for equality. And liberty without equality is just privilege. That is all it is. Mere privilege."

DANGEROUS

The musician also raised concerns about seeing a rise in a dangerous concept of “Freedom without accountability – and that is impunity,” he said. “Those who feel they can act with impunity, whether towards women of colour, in American congress or the environment that we all share, those are very dangerous people.



“We are fighting here today for accountability of nations with regard to the environment, for accountability of corporations and businesses with regard to the environment, but also accountability among ourselves for each of us to take responsibility for our own carbon footprint and the way we are using our resources. Accountability unites us to other great movements of our times.”

He recounted a brief history of British campaigners and revolutionaries rising to stand up for what they believed in, from the Commons land movement and rebels at the time of King Charles 1, through to the miners and punk rockers, and now climate campaigners.

“The only real definition of freedom is one that allows us to have some agency over our own lives, freedom that allows us to make a difference in our communities. That is what binds us together.”

AGENCY

"I know that is why you are all here today. I deeply respect that and big respect to our comrades from XR Youth who are just coming to join this accountability movement. You must know that you are not the first people who have fought these fights. You are joining a long tradition of people who have struggled for a better world and we say welcome to you."

Billy belted out an acoustic set in front of City Hall, where later that day the council would discuss the climate emergency. Among the songs were some of his best known tracks and some covers, including Sexuality, Which Side Are You On, The World Turned Upside Down and a reworded Bob Dylan song, The Times They Are A-Changing Back - rewritten to lampoon Donald Trump and climate inaction.



OCCUPATION

The Bristol 'Summer Uprising' blocked Bristol Bridge, High Street and Baldwin Street and briefly blocked access to the M32. The campaigners took over College Green, and Castle Park was occupied round the clock, all week, by activists camped in tents. It looked and felt like a festival - with flags, musicians, banners, talks, street art performances, clothes swaps, block printing, sofas,

up-cycling, a family zone, stewards, briefings, workshops and a mobile kitchen feeding rebels from donations.

The atmosphere was welcoming, peaceful, clean, organised and packed with hundreds of people of all ages. There was an unfamiliar calmness on the streets, without the dominance of city traffic.



For two hours outside a council meeting held to discuss the climate emergency, 10 teenagers chained themselves to a pink car raised on oil barrels and filled with wild flowers, painted with messages and a banner saying: "Our futures are chained to your decisions."

OPINIONS

Grace Maddrell, 13, was one of several emotionally charged speakers who left some people in tears, saying how scared they were for the future, but warning their movement was unstoppable.

She said: "We cannot separate ourselves from the rest of nature, we may as well tear out our hearts and lungs. Some people disagree with what we are doing and expect us to follow the rules.

"But why should we when the rules are a product of the same corrupt system that allows these atrocities to be inflicted on our world?"



Event coordinator and speaker **Frances Fox** 18, said: "I'm angry at the people in power who have known the facts and science of the climate crisis for decades, but ignored them to protect the unsustainable economy which has caused the crisis in the first place."

Izzy Smitherman, 17, from Bristol, said: "I fear that my future is chained to decisions which are made by politicians and businesses who prioritise profit over our planet. The voice of my generation has been silenced."

Six young people lay down in the water outside City Hall, to symbolise sea levels rising. Others held a banner above them reading: "The youth are crying our planet is." The Red Rebel Brigade, 10 performers dressed in red with their faces painted white, stood behind them.

Elsewhere, hundreds of cyclists on a go-slow protest and eight teenagers laying outside Barclays in Broadmead, covered in white sheets, saying that big banks had invested £1.3 trillion in fossil fuel companies since the Paris Agreement on climate.



Mum **Farrah Fortnam**, from Windmill Hill, ran dance sessions on Bristol Bridge. She said: "We are not having the dialogue like we should be. We have caused much of the problems and therefore I feel we have a huge obligation to help solve them."

Laura Norton a mum from Bedminster, said: "I think if someone says they are not worried about climate change or that we are doing enough, they are either stupid or lying. Not sure what our government is - a combination of both! This demo involved people from every possible demographic, and I wish that was more commonly recognised by critics. I wasn't wearing tie-die and I'm not even vegan! We will not stop, and can look in our friends' and families' eyes when we say that."

Somerset campaigner **Mya-Rose Craig** camped all week in Castle Park: "I feel it's my responsibility to do my part and try to create change. I know our actions annoyed and alienated a lot of people, and it is awful that we have to disrupt the lives of normal citizens who haven't done anything except be stuck in a system where there is little choice in your environmental impact - and when it's really the large companies and governments.

"But I genuinely think our disruptions are worth it if things change because of us. The environmental situation has got to the point where it feels like it's the only way to get people to listen."



Sixteen people were arrested and appeared in court, after 30 climate activists blocked the M32 motorway by gluing themselves to a pink bathtub. Bristol Mayor **Marvin Rees** said he thought the campaigners had 'stepped over the line' in blocking the motorway access.

One man rang BBC Radio Bristol and complained that he could not get to his dying father in hospital in time because of the M32 disruption.

Protestor **Zoe Jones** responded, tearfully: "We are incredibly sorry. We didn't mean for our protest to affect your life in this way. I still believe we are doing the right thing but it's incredibly difficult to hear stories like that."

One resident **Anton Goldenstein** complained: "Was any local government affected? No, just ordinary folk trying to get on with life. Thanks ER. I agree with your cause, not your methods."

Another commuter said he had ripped down the XR banner and moved their signs, angry that he could not drive someone to work.



Musician Geoff Barrow, who played on Bristol Bridge with Beak and other musicians, said: "I think what Extinction Rebellion are doing especially the youth of ER is heroic. Bristol has a long history of protest and it's never been popular with its residents.

"Most Bristolians were against the campaign to end slavery, also because of the wealth the city made. Just like then, I think we will know who was on the right side of history."



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