CLIMATE Youth Protestors

21 youths have challenged the US government’s endorsement of fossil fuels with a landmark civil lawsuit. Around the world, young people are mobilising with direct and disruptive demands for action on climate change. Tomorrow’s voices have had enough and are no longer content to be seen and not heard. Welcome to...

GENERATION CHANGE

by Matt Maynard
When we recognise that the way society is functioning without us is harming us - that’s unfair, that’s unacceptable

The Juliana case has been continually delayed by successive US administrations, but the plaintiffs are confident of eventually getting their day in court.

The heightened sensibility of youth, Juliana argues, makes them particularly effective climate activists. ‘We are trying to understand morals, ethics, values - and when we recognise that the way society is functioning without us is harming us – that’s unfair, that’s unacceptable. We also hold a certain moral authority. We’re not professionals. We’re not making claims or holding values based on self-interest, our careers or finances.’

Karen O’Brien – an IPCC scientist, professor of social sciences at the University of Oslo and lead author of the 2018 research exploring ‘Dutiful, disruptive and dangerous dissent’ by youth activists – agrees: ‘Climate change is an enormous equity issue. When we talk to young people in developed countries, what often gets them interested in climate change or environmental issues is unfairness. They start to see inequity in the world and start to question it.’ O’Brien doesn’t see this as being born from selfishness. ‘A lot of the young people interviewed for the study,’ she says, ‘actually believe they are going to be okay in the future. But they are worried for others.’ Youth who are mobilised around climate change are often from highly developed, highly polluting societies, which are widely considered to be resilient to any impacts. Impressions that the millennial generation is unworlthy or self-interested are not supported by O’Brien’s work. ‘They see sea levels are rising and people’s homes being flooded. Many young people care about climate change – for the next generations, and for other species.’

Yet with this awakening comes self-scrutiny. ‘As a US citizen, Juliana declares, ‘I need to hold where I live, and myself, highly accountable.’ She fires off numbers from the US Department of Energy. ‘3 billion acres of lands and waters are going to be resilient to any impacts. Impressions that the millennial generation is unworlthy or self-interested are not supported by O’Brien’s work. ‘They see sea levels are rising and people’s homes being flooded. Many young people care about climate change – for the next generations, and for other species.’

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In November 2018, a 15-year-old Swedish girl named Greta Thunberg announced she would not be attending the award ceremony for the Children’s Climate Prize because other nominees would be making the journey by aircraft. Three months earlier, in the build-up to national elections, she had gone truant from school, instead travelling daily to the Swedish parliament building with a black and white sign – ‘School Strike for Climate.’ Greta is open about her Asperger syndrome. The protest of this solitary child, seated on the streets and protesting with laser-like-focus on an issue that seemed bigger than her years made for uncomfortable viewing.

News of her strike spread. Greta steered her social media followers though the mire of equity issues, year-on-year emission cuts and nationally determined contributions – providing an unflinching voice on the radically challenging realities of climate science. But solidarity, as with any social outlier, was slow coming at first. Drawn perhaps by the international media interest, as much as identifying with her cause, a trickle of children and a school teacher joined in. In Castlemaine, Australia a sympathy strike was called for Friday 30 November. Attempting to limit disruption, prime minister Scott Morrison’s condescending rant demanding ‘more learning in schools, and less activism,’ spectacularly backfired, encouraging an estimated 15,000 children in 30 localities across Australia to skip school and join the protest.

Meanwhile Thunberg had been invited to speak at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conference in Poland, travelling overland to Katowice by train. ‘You are not mature enough to tell it how it is,’ she scolded world leaders at their 24th annual attempt to mitigate climate change. ‘Even that burden you leave to us children.’ Thunberg is too young to even be a millennial, belonging to Generation Z, born from the late 1990s onwards. Yet here she was making decision makers squirm, their attempts at climate change mitigation up to that point dismissed as ‘child’s play’. While the US youth lawsuit relies on existing structures of the legal system to achieve climate action, these young people in Europe and Australia were acting outside it. In the closing months of 2018, the Juliana plaintiffs’ much anticipated trial was once again delayed by the government defendant following a decision from the Supreme Court. Thunberg’s strike against the system continued. By March 2019, the teen who suffers from selective mutism, a severe anxiety disorder, had an outreach of 642,000 accounts across her social media channels (the UNFCCC’s former secretary of foreign affairs to Mexico, Patricia Espinosa, reaches only 90,000). On 24 January, Thunberg’s #schoolstrike4climate rally-cry called 35,000 students onto the streets of Brussels.

One of them was Maxime Michiels, president of the Francophone students of Belgium. Aged 22 (the same as Kelsey Juliana), the Belgian labour science student brought university students out to join school children on their march. ‘It’s important you don’t credit me for the strike,’ he insists, ‘the organisation is anarchic and there is no leader.’ The meeting point, he explains, was arranged on social media. ‘Without Facebook, without Instagram they would not be able to mobilise.’ But – and this seems key to understanding a generation maligned for being glued to their phones – ‘young
people have overcome social media, ‘going beyond ‘re-
tweet activism.’ Now, Michiels explains ‘they actually’
come down to the streets.’ Placards that day varied
from the witty: ‘Procrastinating is our job, not yours,’
to the accusatory: ‘We skipped school, but you skipped
your care of our planet;’ to the referential: ‘Make the
world Greta again;’ to the plain outraged, ‘F**k the
system, before it F**ks us.’
Any leader attempting to dismiss these youths as
merely bunking off school, only needed to tune into the
World Economic Forum. A teenage Swedish girl with
Aspergers was addressing the owners of the world’s
resources: ‘Some people, some companies, some
decision makers in particular have known exactly what
priceless values they have been sacrificing to continue
making unimaginable amounts of money. And I think
many of you here today belong to that group of people.’
The climate youths were now on all channels.

**TIPPING POINT?**
The extent to which youth activists will be credited
with influencing international climate change policy
at the start of the 21st century is still unclear. What
is certain, however, is that a lot of young people have
already been engaged. ‘The more politicians lose
interest in youth’ Michiels commented to the Brussels
Times, ‘the more young people are interested in
politics.’ While the current decision makers in society
were contemporaries of struggles for racial, gender
or sexual equality, there’s now an increasingly large
proportion of the electorate who have first-hand
experience in the climate justice movement and who
soon will be voting with their feet.

Before Juliana finishes our Skype call, she comments
on youth involvement in the actions taking place in
Europe: ‘It’s hard to measure the impact of strikes or
marches, but I can tell you, it is really empowering.’ She
cites the solitary school strike of 12 year-old Haven
Coleman in the sub-zero temperatures of Denver,
Colorado. Asked why Coleman remains alone in the
US – unlike Thunberg in Europe – Juliana is unsure. In
the UK there was a groundswell of protest for climate
action in November 2018 when Extinction Rebellion
blocked access into London. School strikers were late to
catch on, but on 15 February, an estimated 10,000 pupils
skipped lessons across 60 British cities and towns.

O’Brien believes that youth in the US and the
UK may be distracted: ‘When stressed with difficult
problems such as immigration or economic crises, you
can either shrink or you can grow. It’s so visible in the
UK and the US. A lot of the young people I teach,’ she
says, considering her students in Norway, ‘their line
between “us” and “others” is dissolving.’ To generate a
critical mass of people demanding action on climate
change, O’Brien suggests, developed societies must first
have the emotional capacity to consider those ‘others’
most affected by it.

Whether systemic change is best achieved via
system coercion through the courts; or system
reinvention on the streets also remains unclear. For
now Juliana still has hope in the integrity of US courts.
‘Focus in,’ she says, ‘on what is going to create the
most political pressure in your country.’ Ultimately,
the current generation of decision makers might
argue that the complexities of managing the transition
to sustainable energy systems is lost on youth. Yet
as world emissions continue to rise and the carbon
budget rapidly declines, young people understand the
consequences of their failure.

While faith in politicians is low among global youth, rising stars
such as US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez offer
youth hope for better representation at government level