

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...

Levi Draheim is one of 21 youth campaigners filing a lawsuit against the US government



GENERATION CHANGE

by Matt Maynard

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elsey Juliana is 22-years-old, and she's only got 16 per cent battery left on her phone. This morning she has been helping set up a sustainability event in her town of Eugene, Oregon. By midday the phone is a problem. Rushing down the corridors of the University of Oregon campus in search of a power outlet to begin a Skype conversation – there's an all-too-easy stereotype of the internet hungry, socially over committed millennial. But there the preconceptions end. This lunchtime she has agreed to talk about her role as the named plaintiff in the landmark *Juliana v United States* climate change trial.

As a millennial generation climate activist, time is not on Juliana's side. When pressed, she shares how she was born in a woodland cabin to activist parents. How aged three, she stormed a kindergarten stage chanting 'clear cuts are bad'; how in junior school she raided a waste dump to recycle school supplies and how by age 11 she already felt burnt out. She found focus again when connecting with other young activists and attending lectures on climate change by 'the father of climate science' James Hansen, and 350.org founder Bill McKibben. While her parents had used their bodies physically against logging lorries – Kelsey began looking for her own space in which she could make a stand against a rapidly warming planet.

After graduating from high school in the summer of 2014, she spent four months walking across the US from Nebraska to Washington DC on the Great March for Climate Change, diverting along the way in September of that year to join an estimated 311,000 protestors at the People's Climate March in New York organised by McKibben. Since August 2015 she has been in-and-out of the Eugene District Court as both the Obama and successive Trump administrations attempted to block her case from going to trial.

Juliana, her fellow 21 plaintiffs – now aged between 11 and 22 – as well as her pro bono lawyers from the Our Children's Trust Foundation contend that failures by the government to control emissions from the fossil fuel industry threaten their constitutional rights to life, liberty and property. Each plaintiff has made personalised depositions about damages from across the US, with coral reefs and fishery destruction in Hawaii to mass salmon die-off and reduced snow for recreation in Juliana's home state of Oregon. They also contend that carbon dioxide pollution of the atmosphere flouts the universal public trust doctrine whereby all governments hold natural resources in trust for the well-being of the governed and future generations. Despite constant government actions delaying the trial, the *Juliana* case law is already being taught in more than 30 US university legal courses.



ROBIN LOZNAK/OUR CHILDREN'S TRUST (2)

22-year-old Kelsey Juliana, from Eugene, Oregon has been participating in and leading climate campaigns since the age of ten, including a 1,600-mile march from Nebraska to Washington, DC

Climate science itself is not on trial in the *Juliana* case. It's the timeframe of action and expediency of decarbonisation measures that the plaintiffs are taking their government to task on. The authoritative Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated in October 2018 that current national commitments to curb emissions will still create warming at twice the recommended safe limit of 1.5°C within the youngest plaintiff's potential lifetime by 2100. If successful, the *Juliana* plaintiffs have broad-brush demands for rapid action to phase out carbon dioxide emissions and reduce its atmospheric concentration from the current 410 parts per million (we started circa 270ppm before the industrial revolution), to the number recommended by McKibben's eponymous organisation 350.org.

THE YOUTH CLIMATE MOVEMENT

'Youth are quite selfish,' Juliana asserts. 'That's perhaps why we are so enraged, and taking this issue so personally.' Young people are going to live longer and experience the serious late 21st century consequences of climate change that current decision makers are creating. The 'selfishness' she identifies is about younger generations – some of them not even old enough to vote – wresting back the control dials of climate change to ensure an inhabitable planet for when the current polluters are long since dead.

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

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

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 unworldly 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 about disproportionately high emissions per capita in the US. 'So obviously,' she adds, 'we have a huge responsibility when talking about climate change.' When Juliana travelled more than 6,000 miles to the Philippines by airplane for a climate conference, several people saw an irony in her actions. 'They called me out.' She disagrees though. 'How much are we going to



15-year-old Greta Thunberg has become a figurehead for youthful climate activists

limit our opportunities for education, for networking, for being inspired... based on our sense of guilt? It's a compelling argument in a complex debate over personal responsibility and social change. Although other youth climate activists have begun drawing stricter red lines.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

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 through 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



Student protests have been seen across the world, from London to Belgium to Australia

Thunberg was making decision makers squirm, their attempts at climate change mitigation dismissed as 'child's play'

(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,



Since starting her campaign, Thunberg has been invited to address several gatherings of UN and EU leaders and policymakers

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 jobs, 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.

The debate around how much youth activists, while demanding systemic change, should make personal compromises to limit their own emissions seems undecided and could become a source of weakness



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

for the movement. Mental health issues are also a concern for teens conflicted between the existential threat of climate change and how little is being done about it. At the age of 11, Thunberg lost 10kg before finding focus again for her action. Working in groups, feeling part of a broad movement and avoiding despondency is a common thread for youths who maintain climate action commitments.

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 dwindles, young people understand the consequences of their failure. ●

'The more politicians lose interest in youth, the more young people are becoming interested in politics'



London, 15 February 2019



Brussels, 21 February 2019



Brussels, 24 January 2019



Leuven, 7 February 2019