George Monbiot's blog

This article is more than **16 years old**

Activists like the Drax protesters are the conscience of the nation

George Monbiot

Those who put their liberty on the line for what they believe carry the cost of reforms that deliver benefits to almost everyone

Fri 3 Jul 2009 15.16 BST

The 22 people who have just been convicted of obstructing a train are heroes. They have given up their time and risked imprisonment to show us where responsibility for the climate crisis lies. They will probably have to perform community service, and carry legal and compensation costs running into many tens of thousands of pounds. Actions like theirs - they stopped a train carrying coal to the Drax power station in North Yorkshire - make a difference not through any physical disruption they might cause but by shining a light on an issue we otherwise choose to ignore.

Scientists and journalists can bang on about the climate crash until everyone has died of boredom, but we always struggle to fire people up. The threat seems too remote, too abstract to raise most people's blood pressure. But direct action does three things. It forces the media to take an interest, by providing the drama that scientific reports can't convey. It brings scientific abstractions home to people, reminding us that the electricity we take for granted is produced at a cost that others must pay. Perhaps most importantly, it shows that the campaigners aren't kidding.

New research on behavioural evolution suggests that the greater the personal cost of the action you take, the more likely other people are to respect and follow your cause. The tougher the demands you make on yourself, the greater the chance that your beliefs will spread.

Anyone aware of what the Drax protesters did, or who has read their closing statement to the jury cannot fail to see that they believe in what they are doing. Even if you don't accept their arguments, you have to respect their commitment. No one could dismiss these people as insincere windbags.

When, by contrast, did you last see a climate change denier putting his liberty on the line for his professed belief? As Leo Hickman points out, these people love to see themselves as martyrs. But they risk precisely nothing in promoting their doctrine of selfishness: most of them won't even reveal their true identities.

Perhaps this is why legislators and the judiciary appear to be so afraid of the defence of necessity, which means arguing that you were committing a crime in order to stop a greater crime. The judge at the Drax trial ruled this defence out and repeatedly tried to prevent the protesters from talking about climate change. He sought to try them as if they were common criminals, who might have been motivated by nothing but personal gain.

At the end of last year, following the acquittal of the six Greenpeace campaigners who painted the chimney of the coal-burning power station at Kingsnorth in Kent, the attorney general mooted the idea of striking down the defence of lawful excuse in all such circumstances. Juries would no longer be able to distinguish between people who damage Hawk aircraft to prevent them from bombing

civilians in East Timor and vandals who damage Hawk aircraft for kicks.

If the government does strike down the defence of lawful excuse, the new scientific findings suggest that this policy might not have the effect it intends: the more campaigners it jails, the more their beliefs are likely to spread.

People like the Drax protesters are the conscience of the nation. They always have been, whether they take the form of Diggers and Levellers, Chartists, suffragettes, peace campaigners or roads protesters. In the past they have helped to prevent disastrous mistakes, and have changed the law when the law was unjust. They carry the cost of reforms that deliver benefits to almost everyone. But the greater the cost they shoulder, the more likely they are to succeed.

monbiot.com

More on this story

Drax protester trial: Lessons from the Great Train Ambush

3 Jul 2009

Drax coal train hijackers sentenced

4 Sept 2009

Drax protester trial: Closing statement from defence

2 Jul 2009 ...

Most viewed