Because it is illegal, the climate camp is now also a protest for democracy

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The ban on next week's Heathrow demonstration will not deter us. It will only boost the profile and raise the stakes

Tue 7 Aug 2007 00.04 BST

All we are doing, says the airport operator BAA, is seeking to prevent unlawful protest. But under the act it used in the high court yesterday, all protest is arguably unlawful. The 1997 Protection from Harassment Act, amended by the 2005 Serious Organised Crime and Police Act, creates an offence of trying "to persuade any person ... not to do something that he is entitled or required to do" or "to do something that he is not under any obligation to do", if in so doing you are deemed to be harassing him. Harassment is defined as "alarming the person or causing the person distress". No definition of alarm or distress is given. The purpose of the planned climate camp at Heathrow airport next week is to make people alarmed about climate change.

The Harassment Act has been used many times against peaceful campaigners. In 2001, for example, protesters outside the US intelligence base at Menwith Hill were prosecuted for distressing American servicemen -

by holding up a placard reading: "George W Bush? Oh dear!" In the same year, a protester in Hull was arrested for harassment, on the grounds that he had been "staring at a building". In 2004, police in Kent arrested a woman who had sent two polite emails to an executive at a drugs company, begging him not to test his products on animals. This year, the residents of a village in Oxfordshire were banned from protesting against RWE npower's plan to turn their beautiful Thrupp Lake into a dump for fly ash. The stated purpose of the injunction is to prevent them from causing alarm or distress to the burly security guards the company has employed. No protest, however polite, is now safe from prosecution under this monstrous act.

Neither the government nor parliamentarians give a stuff about how this legislation - intended to protect people from stalkers - is being misused. The amendments to the act in 2005 were not debated in either house of parliament, though some of us wrote to MPs, lords and bishops explaining the implications for protest. In his celebrated constitutional speech last month, Gordon Brown proposed "to change the laws that now restrict the right to demonstrate in Parliament Square". This - the first rolling back of repressive legislation in three decades - is important both practically and symbolically. But it also acknowledges the power shift that has taken place. Parliament no longer counts for much, so we will again be allowed to make a noise outside it. But whisper dissent outside a corporate HQ and you might find yourself charged with harassment, obstruction, aggravated trespass, antisocial behaviour or even terrorism: the fruits of 20 years of draconian laws, beginning with the 1986 Public Order Act.

So why, given the legal risks, have the climate campers vowed to go ahead with their protest? Because it is hard to see what else could possibly work. A leading article in the Guardian last week sniffed that "raising awareness is fine; causing disruption to no particular end is pointless". But the point of causing disruption is to raise awareness. In 1997, when Swampy was hauled blinking out of the tunnel he had dug beneath the route of a planned trunk road in Devon, he was greeted by a crowd of reporters. Why, they asked him, had he not used the usual political channels to try to stop the road? "If I had written a letter to my MP," he answered, "would you all be here now? I think not." If the climate camp protesters were not threatening disruption at Heathrow, would the Guardian have written a leader about the environmental impacts of flying? I think not.

Direct action is a demonstration in two senses of the word: a protest and an exposition. It drags neglected issues out of obscurity and thrusts them into the political domain. Whatever journalists might think of the demonstrators, they cannot help giving them the oxygen of publicity. The storm of repugnance that disruptive protest at Heathrow will cause will keep the issue of flying and climate change high on the news agenda.

This was how, in the mid-1990s, we stopped the Tory road building programme. The newspapers huffed and puffed, but the coverage they gave the protests meant that people couldn't help becoming aware of the

destruction of some of Britain's most beautiful places. The howls of execration directed against the protesters soon turned against the government, and the Conservatives, in one of the most dramatic policy reversals of recent years, cut their programme by 80%.

How else do the critics of direct action propose that we should respond to this issue? The growth of air travel in the UK is being driven not only by the market but also by the government. It has demanded that the airports publish "master plans" to accommodate a doubling in the number of flights between now and 2030. It assists this process with tax breaks and subsidies for creating new routes from regional airports.

Now it has shut down one of the few formal means by which we could challenge its policy of airport expansion. Last month, in a paper scarcely anyone has noticed, the Treasury announced that it is closing England's regional assemblies. The assemblies gave civil society (represented by local authorities and NGOs) a statutory means of restraining the regional development agencies, which are led by corporations. The assemblies drew up the regional spatial strategies, which spell out the kind of development a region needs, including its transport links.

Without public debate, this role has now been given to the regional development agencies. The businesses that run them will always demand more roads and airports (not least because their construction provides lucrative contracts) and there is now no statutory way of challenging them. The purpose of such changes is spelt out by the Treasury with breathtaking frankness: "to deliver accountability to business."

This coup against the wider public interest is consistent with Brown's strategy so far: to talk about a renewal of values, then to appoint the former head of the CBI as minister for trade and investment; to make bold speeches about entrusting more power to parliament, then to rush out 76 policy announcements as parliament goes into recess; to pose as a critical friend of the US president, then to agree to host his missile defence programme without parliamentary debate. Gordon Brown is beginning to look more autocratic than Tony Blair.

Oh, we can keep signing our petitions and writing our letters to MPs and making earnest appeals to common sense, but we know that we will be fobbed off until it is too late to prevent runaway climate change. Only those who have not grasped the implications could argue that the need to avoid disrupting a few holiday flights outweighs the need to reverse the growth in aviation.

By joining the climate camp at Heathrow next week, you will be making a stand not only against climate change, but also against the attempt by BAA to stop people from agitating for a better world. What began as an environmental demonstration has now also become a protest for democracy. I will be there. What about you?

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