

# Kingsnorth: How climate protesters were treated as threat to the country



📷 Kingsnorth protest: Police arrest a climate change campaigner. Photograph: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images

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Police were in no mood for a "softly-softly" approach when climate change campaigners began their demonstration outside [Kingsnorth](#) power station in Kent last year. Their response was harsh and expensive - and has been roundly criticised. The £5m operation involved putting demonstrators, including children, through a total of 8,000 searches at airport-style checkpoints.

Loud music was blasted out to spoil protesters' sleep during the week-long camp, and more than 2,000 possessions were confiscated, including party poppers, a clown costume and camping equipment. Protesters were aghast; they were staging a piece of political theatre to publicise the dangers of global warming. The police looked on them, it seems, as a far graver threat, bent on putting out the nation's lights.

Without perhaps many of the activists realising it, their demonstration was colliding with an established official mindset focused on potential terrorists

or saboteurs. It is a culture that conforms with a change in the way political activists have become viewed by the UK authorities.

Yesterday the Guardian revealed that a national apparatus has been created for dealing with so-called "domestic extremists", a category of political activist that has no legal basis. Working under the auspices of the Association of Chief [Police](#) Officers, three barely-known police units receive £9m to help monitor protesters across the country.

However, another little-known but formidable Whitehall, military and MI5 apparatus exists to protect Britain from such threats, originally designed during the cold war. Highly classified lists of so-called economic key points include power stations and airports, as well as oil terminals, military bases, and government buildings. Together, these comprise the Critical National Infrastructure.

The government's Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure has special access to secret intelligence. The CPNI, working for the security service, MI5, aims to protect the "key infrastructure which are crucial to the continued delivery of essential services to the UK".

Because "severe economic damage, grave social disruption or large-scale loss of life" would result if communications, energy and transport were ruptured, companies in these sectors are helped by security officials. Like the banks, they are thought too big to be allowed to fail. During the second world war, MI5 advised on the protection of arsenals, dockyards, railways and weapons factories. Hundreds more sites were designated as economic key points during the cold war to be protected from imagined teams of Soviet saboteurs. The IRA was discovered in the 1990s to be planning to blow up London's electricity supply, adding impetus to the project.

Leaked documents from the 1990s show that a Cabinet Office committee divided the key points into four categories - nuclear installations were the most crucial and were labelled "super priority key points". But even 60-year-old documents on the subject in the National Archives are still concealed from the public on national security grounds.

Critics say police today are overreacting to political stunts which are not a serious threat to infrastructure. Superintendent Steve Pearl, head of the National Extremist Tactical Co-ordinating Unit [Netcu], disagrees. He said: "I've never said - and we don't see - that any environmentalist is going to or has committed any violent acts. But once they start going into outright criminal acts, which breaking into a power station is, and shutting it down, which breaking into an airport is, and shutting it down ... are you saying that the police should just turn a blind eye to that because it's just grandstanding? It's not, it's serious criminal action."

As a result of these attitudes, government officials, police and the power station's owner, German-owned E.ON, worked hard together against the

Kingsnorth protesters last year. Documents released to the Guardian give a glimpse of their approach.

Regional officials in "resilience teams" began to call together various departments weeks before the demonstration. Officials decided demonstrations might spread to other Kent energy sites. A month beforehand, they drew up a "list of major energy (oil terminals and refineries and associated jetties, gas storage and import terminals, electricity power stations) sites on the Thames and Medway estuaries". They wanted to know the "identified protest containment area location agreed with police force" for each site.

Behind the scenes, officials began to assess for each establishment "the impact on relevant sector if site lost for a) 1-12 hours, b) 12-24 hours, c) 24 hours plus". Particular attention was paid to the liquefied natural gas terminal run by BP at the Isle of Grain. Although there was "a very low risk" of a demonstration there, BP made contingency plans because the site supplies 10% of the aviation fuel for Heathrow and Gatwick .

Privately, officials knew it was "unlikely that disruption at any of the power stations in the area in this week would cause a national electrical power supply problem" because demand was low and power stations had good stocks.

Three weeks before the Kingsnorth demonstration, Whitehall's business department sent E.ON a "strategy document which was written and circulated this week from ... the environmental protest community".

On the eve of the protest, on 28 July, Superintendent Rick Algar, of the Metropolitan police public order unit, sent a fresh summary of intelligence on what protesters were thought to be planning.

Willy Rickett, a senior Whitehall official, told one MP: "We were party to police reports passed between E.ON and ourselves, but in no way did [the business department] play any part in the police operation on the ground."

Police continued to receive intelligence as protesters marched from London to Kingsnorth. They reported "intelligence that [campaigners] will be diverted on 1 August ... to hang banners or shine messages on the oil storage tanks" at Littlebrook power station on the Thames, owned by RWE Npower. German-owned RWE feared campaigners would also protest at its coal-fired power station at Tilbury. Documents detail how RWE "reported police intelligence" about "potential for protests on August 5/6" [at other sites].

As activists started camping at Kingsnorth, police reported "intelligence coming out" [of the camp] of plans to try to shut a nearby incinerator. E.ON joined a closed meeting of police and officials to decide on tactics.

Excitable news continued: "Intelligence suggests that the protesters have an 'airborne unit' where they have a hang-glider which they may use to try and infiltrate the power station". This never happened.

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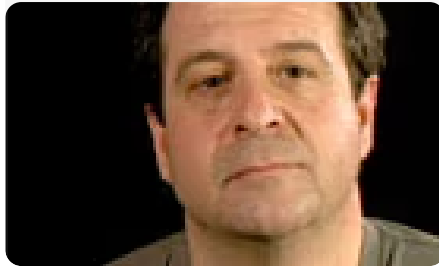


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