

# These minnows would besmirch the names of giants

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM October 11, 2019



Illustration: John Tiedemann

“Extinction rebellion” is not a protest against governments — it is a protest against the voters who elected them. And its message to those voters is as simple as it is manifestly undemocratic: adopt our policies or we will make your life impossible.

It is true the protesters have not resorted to violence, at least so far, but their methods are inherently coercive, punishing fellow citizens by depriving them of the right to peacefully go about their business.

To justify the harm they cause, the organisers cloak themselves in the mantle of civil disobedience, invoking Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King at every turn.

But at the heart of Gandhi's campaigns was the fact Indians were denied self-government. The problem wasn't necessarily the policies themselves, though there were many he strenuously objected to; it was that the people of India had never been given the chance to approve or reject them.

King was even clearer. All citizens, he wrote in his famous Letter from Birmingham City Jail, have a duty to demonstrate "the highest respect for the law". And it was that very respect which demanded peaceful protest against laws that were plainly unjust.

But a law was never unjust merely because one disagreed with it. Rather, the defining feature of an unjust law was that it was "inflicted upon a minority" that lacked "the unhampered right to vote" and that therefore "had no part in enacting or creating it". It was then and only then that one could disobey the law in good conscience.

Writing in the wake of the civil rights movement John Rawls, perhaps the pre-eminent political philosopher of the latter part of the 20th century, underscored King's point. "If we break laws whenever we deem them unsatisfactory," he argued, "the mutual trust and confidence on which our institutions depend will dissipate."

The rule of law represents "an enormously valuable social good" and once the obligations it creates are ignored "egregious injustices are likely to result".

Rawls, who was hardly a reactionary, did not to deny that social and political institutions could be grievously imperfect. But "civility imposes a due acceptance of the defects of institutions and a certain restraint" in responding to their shortcomings.

Making the need for restraint all the greater is the fact when an aggrieved minority, having failed to convince other voters, relies on direct action to

get its way, it tramples on the respect we owe each other as equals.

It is, as a result, solely if the core political rights required for “democratic will formation” are threatened that civil disobedience can be justified.

All that, of course, cuts no ice with the protesters. Scornful of the rule-governed activity that allows a pluralistic society to exist and to persist over time, they see only absolutes, not trade-offs, and believe that those who don't share their convictions are ignorant, duplicitous or corrupt.

Nowhere is the fanaticism more apparent than in Greta Thunberg's calls for fundamental moral reconstruction.

Her demand is not simply for a change of policies, it is for “a whole new way of thinking” in which competition “must come to an end” and be replaced by an age of frictionless co-operation.

There is, in this yearning for a totalistic solution to all human woes, the old utopian fantasy of a wholly transparent community in which everything that divides us has been eliminated — either by agreement or by the submission of the recalcitrant to the dictates of those whose goals are “beyond compromise”.

Those fantasies may be understandable in the case of an adolescent. Unfortunately, there are far more adolescent minds in our society than there are adolescents.

And what those minds have in common is an almost bewildering lack of maturity. A mature person, said psychologist Erik Erikson, is “capable of faith and indignation” but is nonetheless “tolerant of differences, cautious and methodical in evaluation, just in judgment and circumspect in action”.

Applied to the world of politics, where opinions inevitably clash, maturity involves recognising that there is no way to arrive at a fully shared

common understanding, much less of creating intimacy writ large. However, through bargaining and accommodation, there are — and there must be if democratic politics is to survive — opportunities for people who disagree to come together in a shared public arena.

But movements such as the “extinction rebellion” can’t envisage bargaining or accommodation. Not for them the hard work of winning elections; exemplars of narcissism in its group-psychological form, they claim the right to pick and choose among the obligations society imposes.

Nor are they alone. On the contrary, from the Greens — whose leader, Richard Di Natale, recently boasted about how many Greens had been arrested — to the radical vegans, the belief that it is just fine to break the law has become commonplace.

And the ACTU’s Sally McManus has persistently condoned as mere “civil disobedience” the lawlessness of Australia’s most violent union, the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union, with even John Setka citing King and Gandhi as excusing his actions.

But it is hard to imagine an attitude that is more hypocritical and more self-defeating. Hypocritical, because no one is keener to ban conduct of which they disapprove than these crusaders, and self-defeating because exactly the same approach could be used to undermine their own policies should they ever be adopted.

In that too their words and deeds bear no relation to those of the patron saints they so freely invoke. King, for example, neither viewed the US as fundamentally legitimate nor its legal order as deserving of universal obedience.

Nonetheless, he expected his disciples to evince the “utmost fidelity” to the law because only then could they properly require their opponents to

abide by the laws he urged Americans to accept.

And, for exactly the same reason, King insisted the protesters he led should pay the price of breaking the law, comparing the fearlessness he hoped they would display to that of the early Christians. As King recognised, governments must enforce the law if the rule of law is ever to prevail.

In contrast, our law breakers invariably seek and all too often receive leniency, as if their actions had not been undertaken in full knowledge of the penalties they faced. That spinelessness is perhaps unsurprising in movements that, like "extinction rebellion", are largely composed of students and of graduates employed in the public sector.

After all, as Saul Bellow once observed, it is the distinguishing feature of our age that it has managed to cross "the tigers of wrath with the horses of instruction". The result? Galloping ignorance.