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What can Burning Pink ‘ultimatum’ achieve that Extinction Rebellion hasn’t?

Cambridge City Council responds as new climate action group prepares for next week’s cycle of activism

By Mike Scialom

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Burning Pink Cambridge is supporting a national campaign of civil disobedience next week unless its key demand – ‘citizen-lead decision-making’ – is met.

The new direct action movement and anti-political party launched last June with the stated goal of a political revolution replacing the British government with citizens’ assemblies “to tackle the climate crisis and other political issues”. A full explanation of the council’s position – and why it is constitutionally not able to comply with the demand – appears at the foot of this article.

Burning Pink is run by Beyond Politics, a company registered at Companies House. The party’s website says: “Burning Pink is a name we trade under to represent Beyond Politics Party Ltd.” Roger Hallam, a co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, helped set up the new organisation – characterised by unpredictable activism – last year.

The first action – last June – was taking trolleys full of food from a Sainsbury store in London to highlight global food insecurity. The second, in August, saw paint thrown and windows broken at the party political headquarters of the Conservatives, Labour, the Lib Dems and the Green Party in London – an action which saw five arrests for criminal damage and two for burglary. Last month the group wrote to every councillor in Brighton demanding they follow their “moral duty” and bring down the government. This month two activists were arrested for criminal damage after pink paint was thrown against Department of Transport buildings in protests against the HS2 high-speed rail development.

The upcoming Burning Pink day of action is set to start on Monday (February 15) in Cambridge, with 19 UK councils emailed “from Preston to Cardiff to Lincolnshire” being urged to accede to the group’s demands.

This route to setting up a new democratic forum – “do it or we will make your lives unbearable” – is, in fact, an ultimatum, says a Burning Pink Cambridge spokesperson.

“The campaign of civil disobedience will go ahead unless the council come back and open a discussion,” confirmed the spokesperson. “That’s all we’re asking for – to enter into a discussion.

“It is an ultimatum. It’s a set of 12 demands – the council needs to open a dialogue. We’re saying let’s get this started, there’s very little time left to act. The way we’re currently heading will lead to societal collapse and all sorts of other problems.”

The citizen’s assemblies are needed “so institutions serve the best interests of their communities”, added the spokesperson, who added that the climate change crisis is only one of its targets.

“If they’re trying to downplay the seriousness of the crisis what else are they hiding?” he said. “We’re drawing attention to the problems of the last 30 years, the root of all the problems is the climate collapse which will lead to the breakdown of nature and the collapse of the societal order.”

But what is the scope for further acts of civil disobedience when Extinction Rebellion has already set a high bar in the two years since it started? Roberto Foa, co-director of the Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy, says the dilemma of the activism playbook is that it could lead to animal rights levels of threats against individuals as well as property – though it couldn’t happen with Extinction Rebellion because the climate activism movement is committed to non-violent direct action.

“The evidence for the effectiveness escalating tactics, from a violent demonstration right up to terrorism, is frankly mixed at best,” Dr Foa said. “There are plenty of examples of mass movements, such as Gandhi’s campaign for self-rule in India, that achieved their goals while remaining committed to principles of peace and non-violence. Meanwhile the danger of extreme tactics – especially in a democracy – is that you simply end up alienating large portions of the population”.

Dr Foa, though not aware of Burning Pink, seemed surprised by the emphasis placed by the new climate activists on a citizen’s assembly.

“Generally speaking, a citizen’s assembly may not work in your favour if you are a radical organisation – by definition your views are far from the centre, and a lot of citizens will voice opposing viewpoints.”

So where does this leave Extinction Rebellion – are the two groups working together? Apparently not, or at least not directly, according to an XR Cambridge spokesperson.

“The environmental movement will only succeed if there are a diversity of groups using a diversity of tactics,” the spokesperson said. “There is a need for a multiplicity of groups to take action in different ways to build pressure for real action on the climate and ecological emergency.

“Just yesterday, we learnt that the government has failed to deliver £1.5bn of the green homes grant it promised and will not be rolling the scheme over into the next financial year. While the government’s commitments to climate action remain restricted to fine words – as they continue to embark on destructive projects such as HS2, the Cumbrian coal mine, and

billions of pounds of roadbuilding projects such as HS2, the Cumbrian coal mine, and billions of pounds of roadbuilding projects – there will be a need for direct action.

“However, there is no link between XR and Burning Pink, although some activists may also be acting with Burning Pink, just as they may also be members of other groups, for example Greenpeace or Transition Towns.”

Meanwhile Extinction Rebellion protester Cathy Dunbar was found not guilty in a virtual court earlier this week after having been arrested and charged with criminal damage for attempting to turn an empty billboard into a public artwork last year.

Cambridge City Council: We won't act unlawfully, we will explore options

Cambridge City Council has clarified its position on Citizen's Assemblies in the following statement:

“Cambridge City Council has long sought to engage and involve residents in taking action on climate change and sustainability, and in shaping the council's strategy. Over the last year the council had planned to hold a series of open and inclusive workshops to help shape the council's new strategy. Due to coronavirus restrictions it was not possible to do this in a face-to-face setting, so we held five online workshops in the autumn, and an online survey.

“The ideas emerging from this consultation process will inform the new strategy and will be reported publicly to the council's Environment & Communities scrutiny committee alongside that draft strategy in March.

“The council intends to continue to involve and engage residents, businesses and others who can make a difference, both through consultations on policies such as the new joint Local Plan, and through a range of engagement activity, including promotion of the Cambridge Climate Change Charter which we commissioned Cambridge Carbon Footprint to develop. We will explore whether a people's jury or similar approach might be appropriate to help shape thinking on certain issues relating to climate change in the years ahead.

“Citizen's Assemblies have been used in some places, and of course there has been the national Citizens' Assembly on climate change. They have had varying degrees of success, and can be a very expensive and resource-intensive approach that only directly engages a limited number of people, but may have their merits in certain circumstances.

“However, the concept of a 'binding' mandate or even a 'commitment to abide by' the decisions of a Citizen's Assembly would represent a fettering of the council's and councillors' discretion, which would be unlawful. Councillors are directly elected by voters in Cambridge and are accountable to them.

“Any decisions councillors take must not only have been arrived at in the light of consultations as appropriate and various statutory assessments but must not be pre-determined (eg by having given a binding undertaking to act on the recommendations of

an assembly).”

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