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Environmentalism disruption shifts from the west end to the M25

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Three times this week sections of the M25 have been closed by activists from the Insulate Britain group, demanding government take responsibility for insulating all social housing by 2025, and re-fitting all houses with low energy heating by 2030. The protests certainly succeeded in provoking a reaction. Video footage of angry motorists scuffling with demonstrators and being ordered back to their trapped cars by police officers soon went viral, as did a recording of an officer telling activists if they felt any **discomfort**, or needed anything, they only had to ask for assistance. Some columnists have **blamed** protestors for a crash which occurred in Surrey on Wednesday morning, although that incident remains under investigation.

The extent to which Insulate Britain is a new organisation, separate from the better known Extinction Rebellion (XR) is **unclear**. It is certainly hard to consider their tactics or strategy without reference to their bigger and better-known fellow travellers. XR returned to our streets for two weeks from 23 August – September 4 for a series of protests in the capital entitled “The Impossible Rebellion.” There were workshops, costumes, talks, a protest at the Brazilian embassy and an animal rights action at Smithfield meat market. It all came across as rather predictable and formulaic – largely because it was. The same old costumes, familiar activist talking heads and the traditional west end locations. Even the set changes were minor – this time a giant pink table, as opposed to the pink boat the authorities allowed to block Oxford Circus for five days in 2019. In a world refashioned by Covid19, and as the activists insist, one being rapidly altered by climate change, very little seemed to have changed with XR.

XR also found there were fewer people around to witness or be disrupted by their interventions. Whilst London is beginning to return to normality after 16 months of Covid,

it remains a truncated city, with a smaller daytime and evening population. The capital has lost some of its rhythm, in a manner that could not be fixed by the protestors samba band or whistles. Nor could XR disrupt the work of thousands of city professionals, logging in to their office files from home. Indeed, the more prestigious the organisation or more senior the employee, the fewer staff have returned. It was London's cleaners and delivery drivers, and all those denied the luxury of working from home, who found their journeys around the capital disrupted by XR. Insulate Britain seem to have intensified that aspect of XR's approach, this time hitting the London Orbital (as the M25 was originally known) where people still commute to work by car and where much of the south east's road network at some point intersects. Having seen XR flop, Insulate Britain is now looking to up the ante.

Like XR, Insulate Britain has little to say to those who have kept the country going during the pandemic. Here the aspiration to run a car, take foreign holidays and return to normal post-Covid sits in opposition to the demands of the environmental movement. There is bemusement that people would wish to close the M25, whilst police look on. These are not new challenges. A 2019 report by Policy Exchange, [Extremism Rebellion](#), detailed both the passive policing response afforded to XR, and the generous access activists have at times been granted to Ministers and government advisors. It is estimated that [the cost of policing](#) XR protests sits north of £50 million, something which falls heavily on the shoulders of council taxpayers in London.

In [targeting](#) the M25, Insulate Britain takes several significant risks. Motorway junctions are not places to wander about in front of vehicles, waving placards. Secondly, these actions disrupt the journeys of all three emergency services, potentially adding crucial delays to their work. Thirdly key workers, from delivery drivers to doctors, will find their journeys disrupted, with stress and strain added to already challenging jobs.

Protestors cannot have failed to notice that supply chains for the distribution of commercial goods, are currently faltering. Interventions like this, delaying the delivery of foodstuffs and disrupting the journeys of key workers, puts pressure on the government to act. However, the legal framework in which demonstrations are policed is complicated by the 25 June Supreme Court ruling, in the case of Ziegler, that protests which are ['deliberately obstructive'](#) are still protected under Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights. This emboldens activists to be just that – deliberately obstructive. Unmentioned by human rights lawyers, the ruling potentially gave the green light to protests causing far more disruption than the by-now formulaic protests in the West End. This is why some experts, such as Richard Ekins, now [argue](#) existing laws are not fit for purpose.

Are Insulate Britain to be insulated from the costs of their own actions?

Dr Paul Stott is the Head of Security and Extremism at Policy Exchange.

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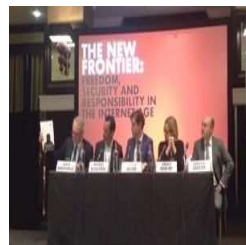
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