

Ireland's Radical(ish) woke activists



Faced with a planetary nightmare, young campaigners should focus more on efficacy, less on having a grand day out with banners

By **Róisín O'Shea**

Like many twenty-somethings these days, the smoking doom of the world often closes in on me until I feel I am choking on a solid lump of fear. I am afraid to have children, in case there is no air left for them to breathe by the time they are grown. The teeth of the late-stage Capitalist machine have chewed up my future before it's even begun.

In the grips of this fear, I faced a choice of staying in bed all day and drowning in anxiety or doing something. Maybe I could turn all my despair into positive action. So I joined Extinction Rebellion.

My partner and I signed up for a training day last November. We were advised on our legal rights, warned of interrogation techniques, and taught methods of passive resistance. We made a plan to take turns as 'arrestables' (turns out there are other roles in XR than chaining your neck to things), memorised the phone numbers of each other's emergency contacts (solicitor first, then mammy), and let our employers know that we were dedicating ourselves to activism and might call in a sick day if we wound up in an overnight cell.

Then we were put in groups and turned loose to organise our first disruption. Would we picket the Dáil? Blockade O'Connell Street? Sabotage a fishery?

I was asked to make some fairy cakes: we would be shaking donation buckets to the tune of 'Jingle Bells,' but with lyrics about rising sea levels. I literally threw up in frustration.

We tried a different branch. This time we all just chatted in circles over a tray of scones in a

hotel lobby and lost even that momentum once the meeting ended. Christmas is a hard time to get people active, even when they're afraid of the end of the world.

What few 'radical' groups we have in Ireland are distressingly ignorable. After my disillusioning experience with XR, I volunteered at a grassroots leftist magazine. Still no dice: there I was constantly frustrated by the goal of making it quirky being held in higher regard than making it good. It was as if they were happy to stay on the sidelines, had no desire to convince anyone new, were content to reach only people who already agreed with their particular brand of politics.

I tried a Marxist political party: no joy there either. I found their emphasis was mostly on keeping up with trends in the American culture war. They were as radical as I could get, and they were still utterly ignorable.

The conclusion I've reached in my endeavours is that Ireland currently has no space for genuine radicalism. Political outrage is washed out by trays of sandwiches and brainstorming boards. Climate anxiety is bandaged in beeswax wraps

and compostable coffee cups.

We're very good at ignoring important things. Look at our housing crisis: I bet you're sick of hearing about it, it's gone on so long. But take any Irish news site and you'll see it's drowned out by stories of Ukraine, Covid, Brexit – anything but the emergency going on right under our noses. So of course, nothing changes. Why should the establishment change something that suits them, if it's so easy to brush off the unrest and dissatisfaction of the public?

People today are politically conscious and mean well. They recycle. They avoid fast fashion. They post black squares on the appropriate days. The trouble is that instagram posts are also so easy to ignore. Being woke is a start, not an end: it can't replace political education, class consciousness, and activism. And I mean real, angry, unignorable activism – not a 'grand day out' with banners.

Of course, some movement is better than no movement at all. But 'glacial' is too kind a word – glaciers may take their time but they rip valleys, crush mountains, change the world forever. No one can ignore a glacier.

I'm also not looking down at the people behind these organisations from a greater height. Many of them have been around longer than I have, are better read than I am, are devoted and conscientious and driven. But it does seem like their energy is being diverted into a 'safe' place, from which no real threat of change can emerge.

I don't know the answer – I wish I did. I still wake up gasping for a future. If a bake sale would help, I'd be up to my elbows in choux pastry.

But our most extreme options are so frustrating and limited, I know that they cannot be enough. **■**



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