

Our Spectator Democracy Costs The Earth

Ross [00:00:28] Welcome to Renegade Inc. The fact that politicians and the 'mainstream media' have to keep reminding us we live in a democracy should be enough to raise suspicions. Broadly, this means that every four years we might vote for one arbitrary group of people over another. But could it be that the word and the idea need to be repeated endlessly because people now no longer feel they actually live in a democracy? Joining me to discuss whether we've ever actually lived in a democracy, are the co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, Dr. Gail Bradbrook, and the author and campaigner, Peter MacFadyen. Thank you very much for coming. Welcome, Peter. I don't know why we're making this program. Democracy is in rude health in the UK. Politicians tell us all the time, that this is a democracy, no less a property owning democracy. Why? Why are we in trouble? Why have you written a book about this? why are you addressing this democratic problem when there isn't one?

Peter MacFadyen [00:01:33] Well, it's kind of like, I don't know where to start when you say that. It's like I hadn't realized we were on some sort of fantasy show.

Ross [00:01:39] This is the first time this program's ever been called when it's called fantasy a couple of times but certainly not.....

Peter MacFadyen [00:01:44] Democracy's in rude health. Wasn't that what you just said?

Ross [00:01:47] Yeah. But the politicians tell me, us, all the time that this is democracy. This is it. This is the mother of parliaments.

Peter MacFadyen [00:01:54] Mother of parliaments.

Ross [00:01:56] We've been doing this for years. We should be acing it by now. And you've come along with flat pack democracy and told us actually we haven't got a democracy.

Peter MacFadyen [00:02:04] I'm in such a state of shock now. First of all, you think or you're suggesting there is a democracy and also you're listening to politicians and saying that because politicians say something, it must be happening.

Ross [00:02:15] Do you think I'm getting this wrong?

Peter MacFadyen [00:02:16] I think you're getting this wrong. I have to tell you that I think you're getting it wrong, that a lot of what you're being told is not true. And we definitely don't have a democracy, and personally, I don't think we've ever had one.

Ross [00:02:25] Really?

Peter MacFadyen [00:02:26] Yeah. There were bits of what the Greeks did which were heading in the right direction. Their exclusion of women and slaves was problematic. But the way that they were choosing people - so people were randomly chosen - what they said is that voting will always lead to oligarchy.

Ross [00:02:39] Right.

Peter MacFadyen [00:02:39] So if you choose people by voting, it will always lead to a situation where the rich will manipulate the system and end up screwing the poor.

Ross [00:02:47] But so thinking about that and thinking about the Greek idea that actually what you need is Socratic dialogue, philosopher kings and people who are experts in their field to genuinely look after the people. Is that the Greek utopia or is that too simplistic?

Peter MacFadyen [00:03:00] I don't know enough about it. But I certainly think that representative democracy doesn't work and it hasn't worked for us for years. I can kind of understand. So I live in Frome, near Bath in the west of England, I can kind of understand why in whatever 17 something electing your representative who then got on their horse, went off to Westminster, looked after your interests and then came back, made sense. But for decades it hasn't made sense. And it definitely doesn't make sense now because the people know more than the person on the horse. You know, the person who we send off to Westminster has no idea about most of the things that he or she is meant to know about and to represent us with. And there's so much wisdom in society that's then neglected. It's it's a farce.

Ross [00:03:42] And facilitating that wisdom of a crowd, it has total blockage, because what you're saying is that if there is this representative democracy, this person then goes to Westminster, actually, they are entrenched and then become part of the problem. And they obviously not going to solve that problem because they're ultimately benefiting from it. That's as simple as it is.

Peter MacFadyen [00:04:02] I think so, yeah. And then political parties, when certainly in the Westminster case exacerbate all that, because that person may not be able to act on behalf or probably can't act on behalf of the interests of the people they're meant to represent because they're being told what to do by a tiny number of people.

Ross [00:04:18] So they have to toe the party line. So then if we keep going with this, it is absolutely logical, is it not, that people are so disenfranchised on the ground when you go back to local constituencies and say voting, what about that? And they say, please don't do it, only encourages them.

Peter MacFadyen [00:04:35] Yeah, exactly they're right.

Ross [00:04:38] Right. So this is an oligarchy?

Peter MacFadyen [00:04:41] Yeah.

Ross [00:04:41] Britain is an oligarchy?

Peter MacFadyen [00:04:41] Yep.

Ross [00:04:42] The United States - advanced oligarchy?

Peter MacFadyen [00:04:45] Certainly. Yes. They've taken some things into new extremes that we haven't quite got to.

Ross [00:04:49] And man and woman on street back in the local areas are legitimately disenfranchised. And that's actually a logical output from this system?

Peter MacFadyen [00:04:56] Yeah, absolutely. The thing which I hadn't expected, but I've sort of found having been involved in this for the last decade, is the extent to which that's true locally as well as in relation to Westminster and the higher levels.

Ross [00:05:07] What does that mean? How does that play out?

Peter MacFadyen [00:05:08] In the vast majority - it is actually a majority of even local councils said towns and parishes, there are not enough people to stand for there to be elections. So if there are 12 seats in a council, you can't get 12 people to stand because they haven't got any power, they're so disillusioned with the whole thing. So it's all crumbling from that level. And I would say that in a way that didn't matter again some years ago. But it does matter now, because primarily because of austerity, if we don't do it, no one will. So, again, we're you know, where I come from, we used to get money for things from counties and districts that money and services came down. They don't exist anymore. They haven't existed for again for a decade because that money has not come from central government. So if we don't do anything about housing, about mental health, about the arts, it ain't going to happen. So unless you've got a group of people who are coherently doing that and, crucially, are working with their community, it's a complete disaster?

Ross [00:06:07] And that void that's left of, well, it's clear what happens. But really what you're talking about is an interregnum because this old system is dying. And what you're talking about with flat pack democracy is making sure that those local groups are vital, energized and organized.

Peter MacFadyen [00:06:21] Yeah.

Ross [00:06:21] But at the moment, we're stuck between those two systems. The old's dying, the new can't quite be born.

Peter MacFadyen [00:06:26] There were problems with the old anyway. I think it didn't work for for other reasons, particularly around well-being and around society. So it's yet another thing, because it's taking power, if everything is coming down from above why do you get involved? Why do you, you know, make decisions? Why be part of your community? And what we know now is that that's crucial for wellbeing and, you know, people's mental health.

Ross [00:06:47] Meaning and purpose. Really?

Peter MacFadyen [00:06:48] Yeah. Yeah, exactly. So because you're taken out of the system, you know that that doesn't help. But yeah, I think it's absolutely true that we need to have that stuff. You notice it most where things like go to anywhere in rural Britain and try and find a toilet. They don't exist.

Ross [00:07:01] You know, like a public loo?

Peter MacFadyen [00:07:03] Like a public toilet. That's probably true in London and cities as well to a large extent. But things like that don't exist because the money's not coming from above to run them. And locally, people aren't engaged with trying to find other ways of providing the basic things that you need.

Ross [00:07:18] Right, which means you go and hunt for a McDonalds?

Peter MacFadyen [00:07:20] Yeah, you hope and get help from a MacDonald's and hope you get into it. However, in our case, what we've done is to create a whole network of community toilets so that you can go on the app, find out where they are and there are cafes and and other businesses who are happy for you to come and use their facilities.

Ross [00:07:35] People might laugh at the loo example, the toilet example, but actually what you're saying is if you can't get that right, which is something so fundamental and basic, you can't begin to get any of the other stuff right?

Peter MacFadyen [00:07:45] And be a parent with a young child or somebody elderly.

Ross [00:07:47] Right.

Peter MacFadyen [00:07:48] And it becomes why you go to a town, it becomes absolutely crucial in your life. I mean, you're right. You could regard it as slightly facetious, but actually, it's a good way of illustrating the extent to which basic things are not being provided.

Ross [00:08:02] Gail, Britain, the United Kingdom, Great Britain, is a country just by the sounds of it, that is too small now to play really on the big stage, but then too big to look after its own people. We're back to interregnum. We don't really know where to place ourselves. Is that a fair depiction?

Gail Bradbrook [00:08:20] Well, I think given that 15 percent of financing of fossil fuels comes from the UK and we are the world's biggest tax haven network, I think we're still quite a big player, actually. And what we do matters in the world and what signals we send out. And we have just birthed to a new social movement from the UK. So we've obviously able to do something. I love this country, actually.

Ross [00:08:43] What Peter's saying is that whether we love it or not, we don't really have a functioning democracy here. What's your view on that?

Gail Bradbrook [00:08:49] Yeah, I completely agree. I put a blog together once called 15 Ways to Fake a Democracy. And then we made a little film that involves faking orgasms outside parliament, which was quite good fun.

Ross [00:08:59] But we're faking a democracy?

Gail Bradbrook [00:09:00] Yeah, it's faking it. I mean, that's the point, isn't it? We can have it like a dictatorship where it's really blatant, where people get murdered in a really obvious way. Or you can, you know, the British government's killing 26 people a day with its policies on air pollution, and it's been found guilty three times. You know, there's no punishment, is there? It's not any kind of functioning thing. We know all that stuff that Cambridge analytic got up to overspending on elections, as you know, lists of things wrong with it.

Ross [00:09:25] Do you find it ironic, though, that we can't get democracy right in this country, but we are very quick to believe politicians who are willing to go and visit democracy on other bits of the world?

Gail Bradbrook [00:09:35] It's the height of arrogance, isn't it, to say the least, as well as violence.

Ross [00:09:40] And that arrogant state of mind is that because we still think, well, the powers that be, whoever they are, still think that we own India?

Gail Bradbrook [00:09:48] It's a fake process anyway. It's just a colonialist mentality and the real rationale is to get hold of peoples resources. I mean, as far as I understand it, a lot of foreign direct investment goes through this whole tax haven economy as well as that doesn't it? I mean, it's not based on care is it? It's not based on humanity.

Ross [00:10:05] When you make those sort of statements, what often you come up against are these right wing types who are, quote, pragmatists and they say, well, listen, you can talk about your care and you can do all that love and you can talk about these principles, well actually, we're doing democracy and we're getting things done. And you can almost hear the rhetoric.

Gail Bradbrook [00:10:22] They're killing life on Earth, you know. The latest science from the IPCC this September is that the methane clathrates are now melting and at least 20, 25 percent are going to go whatever and up to 70 percent. And that's very close to the mechanism of the Permian mass extinction, where 97 percent of all life died. So like generalists that look across the science say there are all three scenarios almost inevitable, the collapse of our civilization quite soon due to food price hikes. And it's already happened in this year. And the food's rotten in the fields. Last year, Latvia and Lithuania had national emergencies and so on. You only need that in a multi breadbasket situation. That's what the academics call it. And Anglia Ruskin University gave till 2040 for that to happen. NASA Goddard last year said it would be soon. The second scenario is mass death. And third one, this human extinction. Like so if they're getting stuff done, they need to question what they're doing. Actually, I often say to people, one of my favourite videos is Milton Friedman talking about the wonders of neo liberalism in the market system and making all this stuff, getting things done. And at the end of it, he said because of the market system, no power will be concentrated and therefore no harm will be done, which is a great. I think that's brilliant.

Ross [00:11:38] It's a good idea.

Gail Bradbrook [00:11:38] If that's his vision, if we could design a democratic economics and legal system that had that as a goal, let's do it, you know. Milton and me are aligned.

Ross [00:11:48] Gosh, we didn't think we'd ever hear that on this programme.

Gail Bradbrook [00:11:49] If that's what he thinks.

Ross [00:11:51] The backdrop to what you're talking about is this level of catastrophe. We talk about not being able to provide the absolute basics and local democracy being a sham, frankly. Do you think it's ironic that the houses of parliament, if you were to try and explain, for instance, the extinction rebellion case and explain the science behind it, that you don't actually have audio visual ability within that chamber to show people graphs? Is that not another aspect of coming to use words to explain to an opposition party and not actually show them a graph? I mean, isn't it ironic that we're in this digital age and we can't show people in dynamic terms what's really happening to the planet?

Peter MacFadyen [00:12:34] It's extraordinary isn't it? But then that whole house and the whole of what it does is based in some other century, just as I would argue that permeates all the way down and so at that lowest level that I'm talking about of towns and parishes is the same thing. So the way that no prime ministers question time is that whole arguing with each other is nonsense. But again, it's not very different if you come to any town council and it's sort of a lot of people sitting around. Well, it won't be a lot of people. It'll be a row of councillors in their suits. But they will have come in. All rise for the mayor. There'll be prayers to start with. That's nice for the Muslim. You know, it's kinda like, what are we doing? And we're still based in these situations. I think it is in a fantasy thinking that we live in this democracy that's working. It doesn't function. It doesn't function at any level. People aren't engaged.

Ross [00:13:32] Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about whether or not we've ever actually lived in a democracy with Dr. Gail Bradbrook and Peter MacFadyen, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. index. First up, we've got a tweet from Amreen Nazanin Rajavi: 'Mainstream media love to celebrate the Hong Kong protests as acts of democracy, but are silent about the Gilets Jaunes protests. Gilets Jaunes protests are still going on in France for almost a year now.'

Gail Bradbrook [00:14:01] Yeah, they should cover. It's happening. There's the job of the media, isn't it, to cover things, not to control what people know about.

Ross [00:14:07] Next from M (Doppio): 'There's a danger in France of reducing democracy to a small political game where only those who want to be elected are playing and the people are watching. Gilets Jaunes have, again, put this huge majority of people at the front of the stage. This, Peter, brings us back to your first half point, which is actually democracy now is the best that money can buy.'

Peter MacFadyen [00:14:30] Which democracy?

Ross [00:14:32] Well, the one that is claimed by the political class. This democracy. You just don't recognize it do you?.

Peter MacFadyen [00:14:38] No I don't. The vast majority of people are not engaged at all, are just simply not involved. So how can that be a democracy? Which is what a democracy should be all about - feeding in everyone being engaged and feeding into making decisions, including those younger than 18. What's that all about?

Ross [00:14:53] Next from Michael Sexton: 'The race to fill local newsrooms. The death of local news in America is routinely cited as one of the country's biggest threats to democracy'. This is really important. Again, the media, if you're not operating at that level, we're not talking about local issues. How possibly can you get it right at the national level?

Gail Bradbrook [00:15:16] Well, it's market principles that apply to local media. It's just the media needs to be paid for it. So it's this fourth estate isn't it? It needs to be well resourced and people need to be involved in telling their own stories.

Ross [00:15:28] Finally, from Richard Jones: 'Great decision. I don't want the general public to be inconvenienced, but this is democracy in action, fighting against wrong systems. And this is a response to the article in the independent newspaper Extinction Rebellion prosecutions dropped en masse after high court rules. London protest ban unlawful. Is that a glimmer of hope. You're happy with that?

Peter MacFadyen [00:15:54] Absolutely. I'm happy with it. It was clearly wrong, you know, the original way that that was handled, and it's great to see. But there is a judiciary that lives outside of the system, which still has some power or seems to.

Ross [00:16:04] Our book of the week this week, 'Flat Pack Democracy. This is 2.0, version 2.0. Peter, pitch it to us.

Peter MacFadyen [00:16:10] The first one, Flat Pack Democracy, I was invited to write up the story of Frome's politics, which is basically how can a small group of people take over a town council without using party politics? So how can they do this in a completely different way? So I write that about five years ago and then this is 2.0, so what happened? So it covers not only Frome but other towns in Britain as well, who have taken that model to take power themselves and start running things in ways that I think are hugely successful. It's an incredibly important model.

Ross [00:16:40] Flat Pack Democracy 2.0. We recommend it. When we were in New York, we talked to Ashley Sanders about Extinction Rebellion and also her view on how it is, in a sense, revitalizing democracy.

Video clip [00:16:53] Extinction Rebellion I think takes some of the best lessons we've learned from the history of mass protest and also the history of just good old grass roots, very localized campaign based organizing. And I think one of the kind of genius elements of it is it's an international rebellion. It's calling for rebellion. And so it's calling out for people just to work on a single campaign or issue, but to see themselves as part of a worldwide movement that rebels against the forces that bring death and destruction and possibly extinction to animals and to the human race. But it also allows people meaningful ways to participate in their actual neighbourhoods and cities. And so Extinction Rebellion has a very decentralized model. Basically, if you agree with Extinction Rebellions basic beliefs, which

is that we need to tell the truth and that this is an emergency and we need to act like one, that we need to rapidly draw down fossil fuels in the next 10 years to net zero, and that we need to think about climate justice and repairing the ways that minority communities have been harmed most by environmental destruction, then you're part of Extinction Rebellion and you can join a group that exists. You can start a group or you can start doing small, targeted, creative actions. And I think that frees people up. Extinction Rebellion talks a lot about the fact that people know that things are wrong. But since they don't see anybody and government acting like the crisis is the crisis that it is, they kind of lull themselves into a feeling of like, well, what can I do? And I guess it's not that big of a problem. But when you see people doing these bold, creative, disruptive actions you see, a) that this is a crisis, b) that there are people doing things about it, and, c) that's not that hard. You don't need like a masters in stopping climate change. You can join the movement right now.

Ross [00:18:43] The greatest battle, the greatest conflict, if you like, is staring at us now, and that is us human beings protecting our environment. How do you mobilize people? And you've done an amazing job so far. Extinction Rebellion. How do you mobilize people to have them understand that the battle you're fighting is in their best interests?

Gail Bradbrook [00:19:04] Well, you just tell them the science in a meaningful way and people get it. And I think people have known, a lot of people have known for many years that this is an issue. Not only is it not changing. I mean, carbon emissions have been going up. I think they went up two point seven percent last year. So people know. I think the main thing, actually, was to give people permission, in a way, to feel it and to put grief at the heart of what Extinction Rebellion's about to say to people, 'this hurts' and we love life on earth. And when you actually grieve for what's happening, you feel heartbroken. It's really discombobulating actually. And it's quite a transformative initiatory process. And that's what's mobilize people are the tears. I think about the issues that we're facing on different layers. So there's obviously systemic issues with democracy, with the economy, with the media.

Ross [00:19:57] But you're transcending those in a sense.

Gail Bradbrook [00:19:58] Well, that's what I was going to say. So there's cultural issues as well, aren't their? These things don't have a purpose, they don't have a healthy purpose at their heart. But underneath that is the patriarchy, or whatever word you want to use for it. But it's this mindset of scarcity, separation and powerlessness. And it requires a certain vulnerability and mourning for what we've been losing, you know, and feeling togetherness and and those kinds of things. And I think for me, the way we've done the rebellion is as or possibly more important than the rebellion itself, because that may or may not work. It's like a mechanical process. You get people on the streets, you overwhelm the state, you get the coverage and so on. It's all in the theory and it makes sense. But there's another piece where people are doing people's assemblies on the streets. And actually you have to be in agreement with our 10 principles and values, which includes things like having a regenerative culture, so how we look after each other. And I think people have had the experience on the streets of London, hopefully in other places of what it would be like to live in community. You know, when we took over Waterloo Bridge and ate together and sang together, it was a really beautiful experience. So I think all those things are helping to mobilize this movement. And the way I say it is we've got to shift the paradigm. And so the only way I can say is you have

to work on four layers. I mean, the fourth layer is for me a spiritual piece about something bigger. And there's a connection to something divine or sacred or love, you know, if you want to be atheist about it. And if you can embody all of that, working systemically working on the culture, working on the patriarchal wounds and the traumas and reconnecting, then we can make the shift. You don't need everybody to do it. We know this from the sort of consciousness shifts that that happen.

Ross [00:21:37] What Gail is saying is dedicating yourself to a cause greater than yourself, ultimately gives meaning and purpose. And what you're saying at local level is no one's really dedicating themselves to the health of democracy because what we've had is an incredibly individualistic society since Thatcher. And actually, you can't serve yourself and something else at the same time.

Peter MacFadyen [00:21:55] Absolutely. And we need to bring people in. There's a huge overlap between what Extinction Rebellion has done and where it came from and its roots and its whole methodologies to what we've been trying to do at a local level, I think. And it is no surprise to me that the ways of working that bind together what we've done in Frome overlap very much with the principles of what are the ways that underpin everything that Extinction Rebellion do. So I work as an undertaker without the hats on. I mean, that's what I do in the in the day. And one of the other things that we get wrong that we've lost to the Victorian era, is an ability to grieve. Someone asked me the other day, you know, how often do you see somebody really crying, really upset? And thinking about it, very rarely is the answer. In our society we don't have that. But a good funeral leaves you afterwards feeling uplifted and confident and able to move on. And it's part of a process. And I think it's incredibly important. The grieving and the real engagement and the tears within Extinction Rebellion's really, really important. We need to be able to grieve what's being lost. And animals and species are being lost daily at a vast rate. We need to be able to properly engage with that. Our politicians definitely don't, you know. I mean, they know the facts, as you were saying before, they even if they had a graph. But they're not really engaging in any visceral way with that, I don't think. They're seeing the facts, if you like, but it's with the head, not with the heart.

Gail Bradbrook [00:23:15] I think it's also important to say, like culturally, we have a system that is deeply narcissistic, the consumer sort of capitalist culture. It's all about me and now and what do I need? And it's mostly about feeding the addictions and the wounds and the things that just make you feel a bit better with all the stress. But in other healthy cultures, they have a real sense of ancestor and a sense of the next seven generations, and you're in this flow of life and you're just going to be here for a while. And when you're gone, you'll be honoured for what you did. And you think about what's come for your children and your serving that. And we don't have that in our culture as part of that process of thinking about death and dying. It's very unliberating. There's early onset dementia in my family. So that's over my heads potentially. And I find it liberating to think I might die soon, genuinely, because it's about now, it's about what you're doing now. Not about, 'oh, I've got to live as long as possible and have as much stuff as possible'. It's not enjoyable that way of being is it?

Ross [00:24:16] So where from here? When we think about Extinction Rebellion for people watching this. What is the one thing that they can start thinking about or start to do, which ultimately gets them on the right side of history?

Gail Bradbrook [00:24:26] Well, we've got groups across the world. We're in 72 countries, there's about 700 groups that people could join or start their own. There's lots of support. If you want to start an exile group. You don't have to be the person getting arrested. You just need support of civil disobedience.

Ross [00:24:41] And would you say to those people who see some of the groups and think actually it's silly as someone dressed as broccoli on a banana phone on a chat show. Because there is a lot of people who get put off by that?

Gail Bradbrook [00:24:50] I mean, to be honest, that's how Animal Bebellion and they're a sister organization.

Ross [00:24:55] You notice she shifted the blame?

Gail Bradbrook [00:24:58] I mean, we did more stupid things to be fair. So mistakes are going to get made. Sometimes delivery won't be perfect and either we learn from it and we grow or we fold in on ourselves. I think it is a crucial moment right now because to be a good decentralized network, we need five systems working really well. It's to do with finance and sharing information and feedback and other things like that. And a lot of getting that right is prefiguring what we do when collapse happens, you know. So how you resist eco fascism. So it's worth doing. We're entering the darkness of winter and I think it's time to kind of rest. Well, I'm talking from a UK perspective. It's time to get some rest in and then get back out on the streets. And we're thinking about in a debt strike next year to really focus on the economic side of the issues.

Ross [00:25:48] Fantastic. And from a flat pack democracy side of things, how do we now re-engage to begin to make vital, again, the smallest but most important bits of our community?

Peter MacFadyen [00:26:01] So I'd say there's a massive overlap actually. Frome, it'll come as no surprise to you, has a thriving Extinction Rebellion group and bus loads of people went from there to London during rebellions. And to me, it's the same kind of things. It's getting involved. It's really taking control back. There's elections in May. There will be in many towns and villages throughout the country. And there's a real opportunity now to to actually go, 'we could could take control about the communities that we live in and make them work better'. And absolutely central to that, we'll be declaring climate emergencies and linking to Extinction Bebellion and working from those grassroots up.

Gail Bradbrook [00:26:39] And we do need a vision that's uplifting, even whilst being realistic. And there's a lot in the world that already speaks to that, like tikkun olam in the Jewish faith. It's about stopping the harm and repairing it.

Ross [00:26:51] Renaissance possible?

Gail Bradbrook [00:26:53] I think we have to birth something new and we don't know what it looks like yet. But there's a lot of clues out there and Flat Pack's a part of it.

Ross [00:26:59] Gail, Peter, thank you both very much. That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail - studio@renegadeinc.com, or you can tweet us at Renegade Inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.