

DOES GLUING YOUR FACE TO THE M25 make the rest of the country care more about climate change? No, it doesn't. Will it make politicians leap into action? Absolutely not.

Never has a campaign been as self-defeating as Insulate Britain's recent disruptive tactics. These annoyingly sanctimonious do-gooders think they're being clever by staging headline-grabbing roadblocks. But they're utterly naïve.

It's true that this little gang of fewer than 200 active protesters wouldn't be on our radar if they hadn't caused some level of inconvenience. An offshoot of Extinction Rebellion, they're certainly getting publicity. But it's all hot air. The headlines are about them and their antics – their intended messages about climate injustice and global warming end up lost and meaningless.

Like many people, I share their profound anxiety about the climate emergency, and deep frustration at the government's failure to tackle it. The insulation of all houses in the UK is a win-win – it helps to tackle climate change, ensures that no one has to choose between heating and eating, and creates jobs. Our homes are among the draughtiest and least energy-efficient in Europe and it's a disgrace that there is still no standard for energy-efficiency to which housebuilders must adhere. (Having said that, given the apocalyptic scale of the climate threat, their solution isn't particularly logical; why not campaign for an increase in nuclear power generation, which underwrites France's vastly superior carbon efficiency compared to the UK? That would be a game-changer.)

But it's their tactics that make me want to glue them to one of Elon Musk's space rockets. Admittedly, being polite often doesn't work; politicians and business leaders seem to ignore courteous requests to do the right thing. But protests should target the people responsible for the problem – not innocent bystanders. Why not glue themselves to an oil company's front door instead? No wonder the general public has taken umbrage – their casual disregard for the consequences of their actions has alienated people who were already on board.

Conservationist Mark Carwardine questions the disruptive tactics of some environmental protesters



GUY SMALLMAN/GETTY IMAGES



A group of Insulate Britain protesters block a roundabout near Heathrow Airport

“These annoyingly sanctimonious do-gooders think they're being clever by staging roadblocks”

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

Worse, by provoking public animosity, Insulate Britain has given ministers the perfect excuse to introduce stricter legislation with the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (although some of the more contentious proposals, such as new powers to stop protests deemed too noisy and disruptive, have been defeated in the House of Lords). The home secretary, Priti Patel, openly admits her intention to “crack down on eco protesters” and the backlash against Insulate Britain provides her with the ultimate smokescreen.

Another result of their naivety is that they're painting all environmentalists with the same tarred brush, making it easier for ministers and business leaders to pour scorn on anyone campaigning for a better future. Far from speeding up the process, it enables the government to dig its heels in deeper.

There's no doubt that direct action can be an effective means of bringing attention to a cause. The suffragettes did it more than a century ago, though I don't condone all their tactics (these 'soldiers in petticoats' make Insulate Britain seem tame by comparison

– they set fire to famous buildings, sent letter bombs and slashed major works of art). Greenpeace did it masterfully in the 1970s and 1980s too – bringing everything from whaling to rainforest destruction to the world's attention.

As the American anthropologist Margaret Mead reputedly said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has.” Unfortunately, the critical element missing from Insulate Britain's misguided approach is ‘thoughtful’. **W**

“They are painting all environmentalists with the same tarred brush”