

Global Kids Strike -- the kids are all-right

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Children's crusades do not necessarily end well. During the years of armed missions to the Holy Land, when Jerusalem meant something to the sacredly inclined in Europe, children were encouraged to take to the rough and dangerous road as it wound its way towards Palestine. In 1212, a boy of 12 is said to have begun preaching at Saint-Denis in France. God had supposedly taken some time to communicate a pressing wish: Christian children were to head to the Holy Land and liberate it from the Infidel. How they would do so was not clear.

They subsequently starved, suffered deprivation, were killed and enslaved on route to their destination. The modern student movement against climate change stresses another Jerusalem, that there will be nothing to salvage if nothing is done now. We are all, in short, for the chop if climate change is not arrested. As an Oakland high-schooler by the name of Bruke told Wired, "My GPA isn't going to matter if I'm dead." And much else besides.

To such movements can also be added other acts of striking in peaceful protest. Tens of thousands of US students did so in 2018 swathed in the grief and despair of gun shootings, the most immediate being the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. The National School Walkout of March 14 and the March for Our Lives ten days later had a biting clarity of purpose: students and staff were entitled to feel secure in the teaching and learning environment. The movement was characterised by much eloquence wreathed in anger and tears, not least of all Emma Gonzalez, who chided those political representatives "who sit in their gilded House and Senate seats funded by the NRA telling us nothing could have been ever done to prevent this".

Criticism of such movements emphasises helplessness and delusion; they are children and so are vulnerable, idiotic and irrelevant. They are to be taught and have nothing to teach the adult world. Leave it to the big boys and girls to stuff up matters. The critics, often estranged from the very political processes they have been complicit in corrupting, see embryos in need of a constructive voice, expressed constructively without inconvenience, not coherent agents keen to affect change. There is, as Kari Marie Norgaard observed in 2012, a lag between the accumulating evidence of doom on the one hand, and the absence of public urgency, even interest, in response. "Although not inherently unproblematic," surmised Norgaard, "local efforts may provide a key for breaking through climate avoidance from the ground up."

The global climate change strike movement by children, blown and swept along by the efforts of Swedish student Greta Thunberg, have suggested the possible short-circuiting of this dilemma: to combat the global by being stridently engaged in the local. (Such statements can become feeble mantras but do operate to galvanise interest.)

For Thunberg, the issue of change is unavoidable. In her COP24 Climate Change Conference speech in December, the plucky youth did not believe that begging world leaders "to care for our future" would make much of a difference. "They have ignored us in the past and they will ignore us again." What mattered was letting "them know that change is coming whether they like it or not."

Protests were registered on March 15 across 2,052 venues in 123 countries. There were 50 in Australia; and protests in every state in the United States. Often forgotten in these movements is the role played by children themselves in the organisational side of things, often clear, fathomable and inherently coherent. In the United States were such figures as 12-year-old Haven Coleman of Denver, Colorado, Alexandria Villasenor of New York City, and 16-year-old Israr Hirsi of Minnesota.

Squirrel scholars suggest that these actions represented a “transformation” at play. Associate lecturer Blanche Verlie claimed that her research revealed how “young people’s sense of self, identity, and existence is being fundamentally altered by climate change.” It can be tempting to read too much into matters, to see flowers grow in fields initially thought barren. But there is little doubting climate change as a catalyst of active and noisy encouragement amongst youth, one akin to the anti-war movements of the Vietnam War period.

There has been much finger wagging against the children from, for instance, politicians who just cannot understand how a striking student could ever get employment. How dare they take time off learning in a classroom while taking to the classroom of the streets? The spokesman for UK Prime Minister Theresa May, for instance, argued that such protests increased “teachers’ workloads” and wasted lesson time. Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn, in contrast, signalled his preference for the marchers and strikers: “Climate change is the greatest threat that we all face but it is the school kids of today whose futures are most on the line.”

In Australia, New South Wales Education Minister Rob Stokes preferred to brandish the rod of punitive action: both students and teachers would be punished for participating in the March 15 rally. By all means, find your “voice”, suggested the threatening minister, but avoid doing so during school hours. For such scolding types, climate change and injustice have strict timetables and schedules, to be dealt with in good, extra-curricular time.

Australian Resources Minister Matt Canavan’s views on the youth climate action movement are childishly simple and representative, suggesting that Thunberg is correct in her harsh assessment. Recorded in November last year, the minister sees education as an instrumental affair. “The best thing you’ll learn about going to a protest is how to join the dole queue. Because that’s what your future life will look like [...] not actually taking charge of your life and getting a real job.” Forget the environment’s durability; drill it, excavate it, mine it, drain it and burn it to a cinder. Australia, and the world, do not need environmentally conscious citizens, merely automata consuming and feeding the commodity markets. For the likes of Canavan, it is too late. **For the children, the battle to change the beastly status quo is urgent, pressing and inevitable.** [Emphasis added.]

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