

The Guardian

The hounding of Greta Thunberg is proof that the right has run out of ideas

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With scientists backing her cause, opponents of the young environmental activist have resorted to ugly personal attacks

Wed 1 May 2019 17.21 BST



Illustration: Bill Bragg

Over the past few days, something extraordinary has happened in our politics. A bunch of grown men have begun bullying a schoolgirl. Perhaps you already know who I mean: Greta Thunberg, she of the pigtails and school strikes, who came to Westminster last week and slammed adoring MPs for posturing rather than taking action on climate breakdown, then hoofed it over to St Pancras for the 36-hour train ride back to Stockholm.

Which left the eco-denialists back here with a stonking great headache: how to bash this 16-year-old celeb? Not by dismantling her arguments, not when the scientists and Sir David of Blue Planet back her up. Nor by sniffing around her record, since by definition a teenager hasn't much of a past to rake over. The standard methods of political warfare off-limits to them, they are trying something new and unusual. They are sinking their teeth into her.

She was "chilling", declared Brendan O'Neill, editor of the hard-right website Spiked, after picking on her "monotone voice" and "look of apocalyptic dread in her eyes". Given Thunberg's openness about her Asperger's, this was a dog whistle if he knew about it, but it was at best crass if he didn't: the kid's on the spectrum! Bringing up the rear were the bloggers at Guido Fawkes, trying to eke a three-course meal out of the morsel that Thunberg's mum performed in the Eurovision song contest 10 years ago - cast-iron proof of "an incredibly privileged background". This finding has been gurningly spread on social media by none other than that vomiting dustbin of opinions Toby Young. You don't need to be much sharper than him to observe that he is the son of a baron who rang Oxford University to get his boy a place.



Rod Liddle: 'devoted almost half a page to "that weird Swedish kid"'. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

This is sad and it is desperate, but one thing it is not is insignificant. Both O'Neill and the Guido Fawkes site form part of the wider ecology of rightwing thinking. O'Neill is a regular on the rolling-news channels, with their unquenchable demands for just-add-water controversy; Guido Fawkes supplies both gossip and personnel to the rest of the British media.

Sure enough, by last weekend the Spectator and the Sunday Times were hosting attacks on this schoolgirl revolutionary, with her authoritarian demands about not destroying the environment, with Rod Liddle in the Sunday paper devoting almost half a page to "that weird Swedish kid" and her "imbecilic" supporters. The Spectator apparently can't get enough of this story, even running a piece by Helen Dale, who posted a tweet calling for "this Greta Thunberg character" to "have a meltdown on national telly". This was a "gag", Dale says now, deploying the excuse of bullies down the ages: can't you take a joke?

Amid this virtuoso vulgarity and sheer crass panic lies a political strategy that has rarely been used in Britain. It can be defined as denying your opponent the legitimacy to speak, not because of what they are saying or what they've done, but simply on account of who

they are. Almost three years after the Brexit referendum, both politicians and pundits constantly fret about the UK sinking into an US-style culture war, where politics is merely shorthand for morality, and where what you say is always less important than where you come from and what you look like. Well, the past few days have been a case study in how a British culture war might escalate.

By no means is it the first example. Let us not forget how the Brexit press decried inconvenient judges as Enemies of the People or urged their then heroine Theresa May to Crush the Saboteurs, nor how Nigel Farage hailed the referendum victory as a revolution “without a shot being fired”, just days after the murder of Jo Cox. But you could, if sufficiently generous of spirit, put those earlier displays down to an excess of tabloid spirits and the commercial need to stoke some controversy. This episode is different: it is about trying to demolish a 16-year-old merely for saying what she believes.

The ironies are manifold. In this culture war being prosecuted by the right, the cut-price controversialists - whose sourdough bread and butter is bashing out 800 words about the thought police - are trying to police other people's thoughts. The career bleaters about the PC brigade want to adjudicate on who is politically correct. They bang on about Twitter stormtroopers and the online mob, then gang up on the web and social media to try to crush a teenager. How they cheered when Adam Boulton, majordomo of Sky News, trashed a student representative of Extinction Rebellion live on TV as being “incompetent, middle class, self-indulgent”!

Of course it is right to debate the solutions suggested by Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion or whoever else. I welcome the BBC cross-examining earnest Labour politicians on exactly what they mean by declaring a climate emergency. Indeed, I might point out that their proposals for a “green industrial revolution” (Jeremy Corbyn) or “environmental growth” (Welsh first minister Mark Drakeford) will do little to deal with the problems they now identify.



David Koch: 'the Spiked website has taken hundreds of thousands of dollars from the network operated by the billionaire Koch brothers'. Photograph: Paul Vernon/AP

But such debates are not what the keyboard warriors of the right want. They couldn't give a flying fund manager about policy. They are not playing the ball but the woman - and they're doing so deliberately.

The most telling part of O'Neill's attack on Thunberg is towards the end of his 800 or so curdled words, when he exclaims that the Swede is "a patsy for scared and elitist adults". This stricture comes from the editor of a website whose organisation, as my colleague George Monbiot reported recently, has taken hundreds of thousands of dollars from the network operated by the billionaire Koch brothers, who made their money running oil pipelines and refineries: in other words, the sort of fossil-fuel industry most threatened by the politics expressed by environmental activists, and which poses one of the greatest dangers to our climate.

In this respect, the right is doing the same as it always has: chummily putting its arm around your shoulder while slipping the other hand into your pocket, all the better to rob you with. Only this time, it's being nastier, more abusive and more personal - it wants a culture war to cover up for its paucity of evidence and arguments.

You can expect more such attempts every time people try to build alternatives to our broken economic and political model. On one side, you have the establishment's licensed outriders, now out of puff and out of ideas. On the other are people far removed from power by dint of age or location or ethnicity or class. They are the genuine insurgents, not the pretend rebels of the right. This is what it looks like when one side knows the jig is almost up.

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