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Just Stop Oil fundraiser tells activists: Just stop — it's not helping

Entrepreneur Trevor Neilson set up a group that funded Extinction Rebellion and JSO. He has since resigned and now says their methods are 'counterproductive' — alienating those they seek to persuade



"If the public have a protester standing in front of their car, so that their kid is late for their test that day, that does not encourage them to join the movement," says Trevor Nielson

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I man who is about to disown a prominent part of his life's work, chastise friends and former colleagues, and call into question the movement he helped start.

Neilson, 50, is a wealthy California entrepreneur, and looks the part. On a sunny day last week at the office of his start-up in the wealthy Pacific Palisades area, a stone's throw from the crashing surf, Neilson sports a T-shirt, jeans, slip-on shoes, and the air of a man ready to unburden himself.

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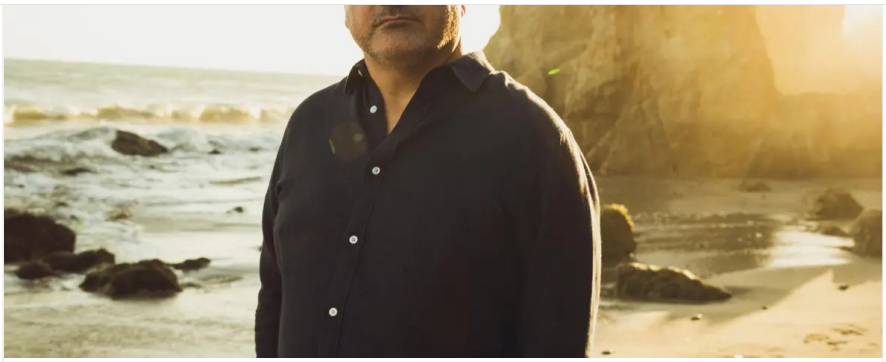
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Four years ago, Neilson tapped his network of billionaires and Hollywood A-listers to bankroll what he called a "wild-ass idea": to finance a band of extremist activists, mostly in London and Europe, who would use guerrilla tactics to wake up the world to the climate emergency.

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Neilson founded the Climate Emergency Fund that financed Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, but says some protestors have lost the plot and are actually holding back the cause of fighting climate change

KEVIN SCANLON

The organisation he started, the Climate Emergency Fund (CEF), gave birth to and became the prime financial backer of Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, among more than 100 other activist groups, which have become infamous for lying in the streets and "slow marching" through London, causing traffic snarl-ups. They have thrown soup on Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* in the National Gallery, defaced buildings, glued themselves to walls and disrupted football matches.

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supporter of such tactics, has watched with growing unease. And now he has chosen to speak out, for the first time, about what has gone wrong with the movement he helped launch.

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The protesters, he said, have lost the plot, veering from clear-eyed radicals catalysing change to unserious rabble-rousers who are actually holding back the cause. "It's become disruption for the sake of disruption. Working people that are trying to get to their job, get their kid dropped off at school, survive a brutal cost of living crisis in the UK, you know, there's a certain hierarchy of needs that they have. If at the same time they have a pink-haired, tattooed and pierced protester standing in front of their car, so that their kid is late for their test that day, that does not encourage them to join the movement," he said. "It's just performative. It's not accomplishing anything. I absolutely believe that it has now become counterproductive, and I just feel like that has to be said by somebody that was involved in the beginnings of what it has become."

Indeed, it emerged last week that Just Stop Oil, which has reportedly received more than £1 million from the CEF — the fund declined to give specific numbers— plans to disrupt Wimbledon. The British public has become increasingly exasperated with their tactics. A group of protesters "slow marching" through Camden, north London, on Thursday had a

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A Just Stop Oil protester jumps on a snooker table and throws orange powder during the World Championship at Crucible Theatre

VCG/GETTY IMAGES

Neilson's argument is that the time for such tactics has passed. When he co-founded the CEF in 2019, he recalled, "No one was talking about climate change". Since then, Britain became one of the first western governments to declare a climate emergency. In America, Joe Biden passed the Inflation Reduction Act, an unprecedented policy that is expected to plough more than $1 trillion in subsidies and tax cuts into green energy and other climate technologies.

Change is not happening fast enough, Neilson says, but the time for shock therapy is over. Now is the time to bring everyone into the tent. If the world is to meaningfully confront climate change, everyone needs to get involved, from ranchers and Republicans, tree-huggers and hunters, fossil fuel giants and clean tech upstarts. "This is going to require an immensely difficult navigation of the middle, and the activists are ostracising the exact people that they need to engage. They're creating an excuse for people to stay on the sidelines," he said. "Blocking bridges is a lot easier than building bridges, and that is what we need to do if we are going to succeed."

Margaret Klein Salamon, CEF's executive director, "strongly

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Klein Salamon also takes issue with the idea that the legal, non-violent, but highly disruptive tactics her organisation funds are alienating the public. "It is an interesting speculation, but the evidence shows exactly the opposite," she argues, pointing to a recent study conducted by Just Stop Oil that showed its actions generated increased public support for moderate climate groups. "We support disruptive activists because it is the fastest way to create transformative change."

Is Neilson worried about what his other former colleagues will think?

"Oh, I would imagine I'll hear from Roger."

Neilson was first put in touch with Roger Hallam, co-founder of Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, in 2018, via Daniel Pinchbeck, a controversial author who Neilson describes as "at the intersection of the psychedelic realm and the ecological collapse".

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Roger Hallam was an organic farmer from Wales who turned activist after claiming he lost his business due to extreme weather. He grew disenchanted with Extinction Rebellion and left to found Just Stop Oil

KATIE WILSON FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Hallam, who did not respond to a request for comment, was an organic farmer from Wales who turned activist after claiming that he lost his business due to extreme weather. In one of their first meetings, Neilson recalls, Hallam called him a "f*****g capitalist".

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But they found common cause in climate change, and, specifically, the sense that there was entirely too little urgency in addressing it. Neilson had long worked in climate change; he ran a London-listed sustainable investment firm called IX Net Zero. But it was the Malibu fires in 2018 that changed him.

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still standing or whether his wife and children had evacuated in time.



Just Stop Oil protesters throw cans of tomato soup at Vincent van Gogh's Sunflowers at the National Gallery in London

JUST STOP OIL/GETTY IMAGES

Fortunately, they had. "I'd been working on sustainability from a pretty comfortable place," he said. "It's a whole different thing when you're in the frying pan. It was a real wake-up call." More than 1,000 buildings were destroyed. Three people died.

Before his investment firm, Neilson worked as head of public affairs for Bill Gates. That job, and a subsequent stint running a global philanthropy group, put him on a first-name basis with billionaires, stars like U2 frontman Bono and leaders including Desmond Tutu.

Neilson opened his Rolodex and flew into organising mode. He and his wife started an NGO, called the Malibu Foundation, and raised money with his neighbours Gerry and Sean (the actors Gerard Butler and Sean Penn) for people who had lost everything. "There's a real misperception about Malibu, which is that everybody's rich people, it's just not true," he said. Another

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It was around then that Pinchbeck put him in touch with Hallam. With the wildfire still fresh in his mind, Neilson organised the Climate Emergency Fund with Rory Kennedy, sister of the presidential candidate Robert Kennedy Jr, and a neighbour (naturally), and Aileen Getty, scion of the American oil dynasty.

Extinction Rebellion became the biggest recipient of funds, which Hallam swiftly put to use causing mayhem in Britain, starting in 2019. Why Britain? The fund, after all, is an American organisation. "That's where there was momentum," Neilson said. "And that really is due to the leadership of what became Extinction Rebellion. During that point in time, there was very little happening in the US."

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Hallam's Just Stop Oil protest group have thrown soup on Van Gogh's Sunflowers in the National Gallery, defaced buildings, glued themselves to walls and disrupted football matches

ZUMA PRESS/ALAMY

Initially, the plan worked. "The theory was: this issue has to be put on the agenda. The focus was on trying to get governments to declare a climate emergency, which actually happened in the UK, and it was in large part due to this pressure from these activists. I consider the early work of Extinction Rebellion to have been really important. I think that those people were heroic. But now, I think there's a need for a new evolution of climate activism."

Extinction Rebellion has experimented with a softer approach. Two of its leaders last year said they had "quit" doing stunts that disrupted the lives of normal people. Yet after the fairly orderly mass protest it organised at Westminster in April generated little media coverage, an Extinction Rebellion organiser said recently that the group now had the "moral licence" to return to public disruption.

Hallam left to start Just Stop Oil in 2022. CEF remains its chief funder.

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Not long after Extinction Rebellion got going, Neilson had begun to advocate internally for a more centrist, coalition-building approach. It became clear, he said, that his colleagues had little interest. So nearly two years ago he stepped down quietly as chairman of the CEF, and watched as it funded ever more extreme organisations. The CEF has, since 2019, funded 106 organisations, trained 30,000 activists and last year doled out more than £4 million to protest groups.

Klein Salamon argues that the world needs a "Pearl Harbor moment" to mobilise every corner of society. Neilson agrees, but disagrees with the activists' approach.

The way Neilson sees it, if we are to clean up the planet, virtually every corner of the economy, from how we produce energy and grow food to how we get around, will need to be remade. A revolution that thorough will need co-operation from people across society — and opposite sides of the political spectrum. "This is the hardest thing humanity has ever done. Stopping a guy from getting to his job as a baker, or as a construction worker, is an illogical way [to approach it]", he argues.

Twenty years ago, Neilson worked closely with Bono as the U2 star helped mobilise billions of dollars from the US government

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situation in Biblical terms. "Matthew 25 was the section of the Bible that he always talked about," Neilson says, "which is the part of the Bible that talks about, 'What you have done to the least of us, you have done unto me'."

The strategy worked. With enough Republicans onside, President Bush launched an emergency Aids plan in 2003 that funded cheap drugs for the developing world, saving an estimated 25 million lives.

"It shows you what can happen when you bring together a unique coalition of people. It was Aids activists from the cities, but it was also Christian evangelicals and megachurch pastors. We need something similar on climate," he says.

So does he regret his role in spawning the movement he now sees as an impediment? Not at all, he says.

"The thing that first drew me toward the early work of Extinction Rebellion was this notion that if you tell the truth, it can evolve the issue. And so, I guess I just consider this to be a part of telling the truth. I don't think it's currently working, and I think it needs to change. I admire their intentions, I just think the tactics are, at this point, harming the cause."

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