

Celebrities add voices to outcry over severity of Just Stop Oil sentences

Chris Packham calls for meeting with attorney general as prominent figures condemn long jail terms for M25 activists

[Damien Gayle](#) and [Helena Horton](#)

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Chris Packham has called for a meeting with the attorney general for England and Wales as he joined a chorus of prominent voices condemning long jail terms for Just Stop Oil protesters.

Speaking after [five activists were sentenced](#) to up to five years for planning protests on the M25, the broadcaster and naturalist said: “Be clear, be very, very clear, this is not just about climate activism.

“The laws that have been drafted, the injustices that are being wrought, threaten all rights of free speech. We stand here today because our future security may be compromised by the reckless and irresponsible erosion of our human rights, of our fundamental freedoms.”

Packham called for a recorded meeting with the new attorney general, Richard Hermer KC, “as rapidly as possible” to “address this grotesque miscarriage of justice”.

Packham appeared with the television chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, the eco-entrepreneur Dale Vince, the Labour MP [Clive Lewis](#) and the Green peer Jenny Jones outside Southwark crown court, where crowds gathered after the sentencing.

Fearnley-Whittingstall said the activists, Roger Hallam, Daniel Shaw, Louise Lancaster, Lucia Whittaker De Abreu and Cressida Gethin had been “viciously sentenced under some extremely pernicious legislation, which should just not be in place.

“It’s increasingly obvious to all of us that these laws were put in place to protect the fossil fuel companies and to protect a version of business as usual that continues to damage the climate and harm us all.

“But we should be clear that these laws also remove the rights of every British citizen to engage in peaceful protest.”

Packham’s call to meet the new attorney general was supported by Vince, who last year switched from financing [Just Stop Oil](#) to becoming one of Labour’s biggest donors.

After the sentencing, Vince issued a statement saying: “I think climate denial should be illegal, but instead it’s illegal to talk about the climate crisis in court. Now five peaceful protesters could face years in jail as a result of this perverse ruling. It’s a travesty of justice and that’s why I’m joining the calls for the new attorney general to intervene.”

Lewis backed calls for Hermer, who was made a peer on Thursday so he could serve in government, to act.

“I think that needs to happen as a matter of some urgency,” Lewis said. “I will be raising this in parliament, as I’m sure many others will be as well. I also think that those laws that have allowed this to happen need to be overturned and put into the dustbin of history.

“And I will be cheering a [Labour](#) government on to do as much as it can to stop oil extraction, to stop that exploitation, and to ensure that those five are released as soon as possible.”

Bill McGuire, the emeritus professor of geophysical and climate hazards at University College London, whose expert evidence the judge said could not be heard in court, derided the trial and verdict as “a farce”.

“They mark a low point in British justice and they were an assault on free speech,” he said. “The judge’s characterisation of climate breakdown as a matter of opinion and belief is completely nonsensical and demonstrates extraordinary ignorance.”

“Similarly, to suggest that the climate emergency is irrelevant in relation to whether the defendants had a reasonable case for action is crass stupidity.”

PUBLIC ORDER ACT: NEW PROTEST OFFENCES & ‘SERIOUS DISRUPTION’

As the Government’s Public Order Act 2023 comes into force, we explain the new protest offences and new definition of ‘serious disruption’, and what they mean for protesters and organisers.

What is the aim of the Public Order Act?

What is the existing legal framework?

New protest offences

Locking-on

Being equipped for locking-on

Causing ‘serious disruption’ by tunnelling or being present in a tunnel

Being equipped for tunnelling

Obstructing major transport works

Interfering with key national infrastructure

What is ‘serious disruption’?

Further information

WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE PUBLIC ORDER ACT?

The Public Order Act aims to increase the police’s ability to restrict and criminalise protest activity by introducing a range of new powers which allow, among other things, for:

- new and expanded use of stop and search;
- orders that ban people from participating in protests and control their movement/activity/associations;
- new offences that criminalise certain kinds of protests altogether.

The Government has **explicitly referred** to Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, and Insulate Britain protests as justification for its introduction.

WHAT IS THE EXISTING LEGAL FRAMEWORK?

The Public Order Act 2023 builds on the existing legal framework governing the policing of protests. This is mainly contained in the [Public Order Act 1986](#), which remains in force. Further changes to this framework were introduced by the Policing Act 2022. You can read more about these changes in our [overview](#).

This page will focus on the changes introduced by the Public Order Act 2023.

NEW PROTEST OFFENCES

The Public Order Act 2023 introduces the following new criminal offences:

- locking-on & being equipped for locking-on – **currently in force**
- causing serious disruption by tunnelling / being present in a tunnel & being equipped for tunnelling – **currently in force**
- obstructing major transport works – **currently in force**
- interfering with key national infrastructure – **currently in force**

LOCKING-ON

‘Locking-on’ is when protesters attach themselves to other people, objects, or buildings. It is a tactic used throughout history, but the Public Order Act 2023 now makes it a criminal offence. You will be committing this offence when you:

- attach yourself to another person, an object or land;
- attach a person to another person, an object, or land;
- attach an object to another object or to land; **and**
- your activities cause or can cause ‘[serious disruption](#)’ to two or more people or to an organisation in a public place.

To commit this offence, you must have intended your acts to cause serious disruption, or you were reckless as to whether your acts would cause serious disruption.

If convicted, you are punishable with up to six months’ imprisonment, a fine, or both.

There is a defence of ‘reasonable excuse’ for this offence.

The first arrests for this offence (reported by [Netpol](#)) was of a group of Palestine Action protesters on 1 November 2023, after they chained themselves together at the entrance to Israeli arms company Elbit’s HQ.

BEING EQUIPPED FOR LOCKING-ON

This offence criminalises those who are ‘equipped for locking on’. You will be committing this offence if you are:

- carrying an object in public; **and**

- intending to use the object ‘in the course of or in connection with’ yourself or any other person committing the offence of locking on.

If convicted, you are punishable with an unlimited fine.

CAUSING ‘SERIOUS DISRUPTION’ BY TUNNELLING OR BEING PRESENT IN A TUNNEL

These offences criminalise the act of tunnelling, where you:

- create a tunnel, participate in creating a tunnel, or are present in a tunnel; **and**
- cause or are capable of causing ‘serious disruption’ to two or more people or to an organisation in a place other than a dwelling; **and**
- intend or are reckless as to whether creating or being in a tunnel will cause or be capable of causing ‘serious disruption’.

If convicted in a magistrates’ court, these offences are punishable with imprisonment for up to the general limit in a magistrates’ court, a fine, or both. If convicted in a crown court, the maximum penalty is three years’ imprisonment, a fine, or both.

There is a defence of ‘reasonable excuse’ for this offence. For example, if your presence in the tunnel or creation of the tunnel was authorised by a person who had an interest in the land.

BEING EQUIPPED FOR TUNNELLING

You will be committing this offence if you:

- have an object with you in a place other than a dwelling; **and**
- intend to use it for, or in connection with, the above tunnelling offences.

If convicted, you are punishable with up to six months, a fine, or both.

OBSTRUCTING MAJOR TRANSPORT WORKS

This offence criminalises behaviour that obstructs or interferes with the construction or maintenance of transport works, such as HS2. You will be committing this offence if you:

- obstruct individuals (like construction workers) from constructing or maintaining any major transport works; **or**
- interfere with, move, or remove apparatus relating to constructing or maintaining major transport works.

If convicted, you are punishable with up to six months’ imprisonment, a fine, or both.

There is a defence of ‘reasonable excuse’ for this offence.

INTERFERING WITH KEY NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

This offence criminalises behaviour which prevents ‘to any extent’ or ‘significantly’ delays the operation of key infrastructure (including roads, railways, airports, harbours, oil & gas or electricity generation infrastructure or newspaper printing) in England and Wales. There is a list of key national infrastructure specified in the Act, which can be added to by the Secretary of State.

You will be committing this offence if you:

- take action that interferes with the use or operation of key national infrastructure; **and**
- intend or are reckless as to whether your actions will interfere with the use or operation of key national infrastructure.

If convicted in a magistrates’ court, you are punishable with imprisonment for up to the general limit in a magistrates’ court (six months), a fine, or both. If convicted in a crown court, you are punishable with up to 12 months’ imprisonment, a fine, or both.

There is a defence of ‘reasonable excuse’ for this offence.

This offence has been used to [arrest Just Stop Oil protesters](#) on 1 November 2023 and [charge them](#) on 2 November 2023.

WHAT IS ‘SERIOUS DISRUPTION’?

The definition of ‘serious disruption’ in the Public Order Act 2023 includes situations in which individuals or organisations are:

- by physical obstruction, **prevented or hindered** (to more than a minor degree) from doing:
 - **day-to-day activities** (including journeys); or
 - **construction or maintenance works** or related activities
- **prevented or delayed** (to more than a minor degree) from making or receiving a **delivery** of a **time-sensitive product**; or
- **prevented or disrupted** (to more than a minor degree) from accessing **essential goods or services**.

FURTHER INFORMATION

More information on your protest rights is available on our Advice and Information [Hub](#), including the following pages:

- [YOUR RIGHT TO PROTEST](#)
- [PUBLIC ORDER ACT: NEW PROTEST STOP & SEARCH POWERS](#)

- [HOW TO ORGANISE A PROTEST](#)
- [HOW TO ORGANISE A MORE ACCESSIBLE PROTEST](#)
- [HOW DOES THE NEW POLICING ACT AFFECT MY PROTEST RIGHTS?](#)
- [WHAT IF I'M ARRESTED AT A PROTEST?](#)
- [PROTEST BUST CARDS \(WITH TRANSLATIONS\)](#)
- [PRACTICAL PROTEST TIPS](#)
- [PRACTICAL TIPS FOR DISABLED PROTESTERS](#)
- [A GUIDE TO KETTLING](#)
- [YOUR RIGHTS AS AN LGBTQ+ PROTESTER OF COLOUR](#)
- [YOUR RIGHTS AS A DISABLED PROTESTER](#)
- [MONITORING & REPORTING ON PROTESTS \(JOURNALISTS & LEGAL OBSERVERS\)](#)

CONTACT US FOR ADVICE AND INFORMATION

If you would like advice and information on your protest rights, and the above pages do not answer your questions, you can contact us:

CALL OUR HUMAN RIGHTS INFORMATION LINE

You can reach the Human Rights Information Line by calling 0800 988 8177 and selecting option 3 from the main menu (Monday evenings from 6pm to 8pm, Tuesday lunchtimes from 12pm to 2pm and Thursday evenings from 6pm to 8pm)

More information about our Human Rights Information Line is available [here](#).

WRITE TO US

You can send us a written query via our [webform](#).

You can also write to us via post at:

26-30 Strutton Ground

London

SW1P 2HR

More information about how to contact us is available [here](#).

What are my rights on this?

Find out more about your rights and how the Human Rights Act protects them
[Know your rights](#)

