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The Evolution of Protest in Britain

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The face of protest in Britain has shifted dramatically since the early 2000s. Gone are the days when the word “protest” conjured images of orderly marches through city streets, with thousands united under a shared cause. Today, the scene is more likely to involve small, confrontational acts of defiance, think activists glued to roads or hauled away by police for bold, disruptive stances. This transformation reflects not just changing tactics but a deeper struggle against an increasingly restrictive state. So, how did we get here?

In the early 2000s, protests were defined by scale and visibility. The anti-Iraq War marches of 2002 and especially 15 February 2003 drew an estimated 750,000 to 2 million people, a mobilisation involving around 6% of UK households. These demonstrations were designed to sway governments sensitive to public opinion, relying on sheer numbers to make a point. But their impact hinged on a receptive state and required immense logistical effort. When these peaceful gatherings failed to shift policy, disillusionment set in, paving the way for new approaches.

By the 2010s, frustration with ineffective marches led activists to embrace disruption. Inspired by global movements like the Arab Spring, where occupations and uprisings toppled regimes, British protesters began staging spontaneous, rule-breaking actions. The 2011 London riots illustrated a turn toward more impulsive and confrontational tactics in public disorder. Occupations of public spaces also gained traction, with groups like Extinction Rebellion (XR) mastering the art by 2019. Extinction Rebellion's 2019 occupations of London bridges and roads drew international media coverage and helped significantly grow its supporter base.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this momentum. Mass occupations became near-impossible under lockdown restrictions, forcing activists to pivot to smaller, high-impact direct actions. Groups such as Just Stop Oil and Fathers4Justice have executed high-profile stunts, including souping artworks and motorway blockades, to amplify their messages. These acts, amplified by social media, didn't need large crowds to make waves. Yet, as restrictions eased, attempts to revive mass protests, like XR's "The Big One" in April 2023, fell flat, with turnout disappointing organisers.

Today, groups like Palestine Action dominate the protest landscape, targeting businesses and infrastructure they accuse of complicity in global injustices. Unlike earlier movements aiming to sway public opinion, these tactical strikes focus on direct impact, disrupting the operations of specific targets. Meanwhile, groups like Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain face unprecedented state crackdowns, with harsher sentencing and legal barriers raising the stakes for activists. In response, campaigns like Defend Our Juries have emerged, challenging the justice system itself to protect the right to protest. In a recent statement, Defend Our Juries declared, "Democracy is under siege; resistance is our only option," highlighting their campaign to defy restrictive laws through mass non-compliance.

The current government's approach has only intensified this battle. Recent policies—particularly the proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation on 5 July 2025—

mark a significant escalation in state measures against dissent. This has sparked what some call “activism about activism,” with groups fighting to preserve their right to challenge authority. The “We Do Not Comply” campaign advocates mass refusal to comply with terrorism-related restrictions to challenge perceived state overreach. As sanctions tighten, protesters are not just battling for their causes but for the very ability to protest.

Despite the effectiveness of targeted actions, abandoning mass protests may be a misstep. Evidence from the US, where large-scale demonstrations following George Floyd’s murder mobilised millions even during the pandemic, suggests there’s still power in numbers. Recent pro-Palestine marches in the UK also show public appetite for collective action remains strong. These broader movements draw in diverse crowds, avoiding the alienation that can come with niche, high-risk stances. If British activists hope to stay relevant, they must rediscover the strength of the masses before the state’s grip tightens further.