In a rare moment of bipartisanship in the House of Commons, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer joined prime minister Boris Johnson and a number of other MPs to condemn climate protest group Extinction Rebellion’s blockade of News Corporation’s printing sites, which prevented the publication of their 1.5 million newspapers the following day.

What happened?

On the evening of Friday 4 September over 100 members of Extinction Rebellion (XR) blockaded a number of printing presses around the UK that print national newspapers including The Times, Financial Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Sun and Daily Mail. Forty protestors used a boat to block the printing site in Merseyside. There were many arrests. The demonstrations ended at 11 a.m. the following day, after the disruption of the newspapers’ publication was complete.

One of the tactics that XR used in the protests was to go ‘floppy’ when arrested; this then resulted in a number of police officers needing to be involved in each arrest, which gave the impression that the police were being heavy-handed.

How did XR defend their actions?

XR claimed that the disruption was in rebellion over the lack of action on climate change after the government delayed the second reading of the Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill until March 2021. The bill, supported by Green Party MP Caroline Lucas, would force the government to abide by the climate change targets made in the Paris Agreement. XR also want the government to hold citizens’ assemblies to decide on climate policy. The first such assembly took place in Birmingham in January 2020, but XR want more to be held and for the assemblies to have more influence.

The day before the News Corp blockade, members of XR glued themselves to one of the entrances to the Houses of Parliament in an attempt to prevent MPs from entering, arguing that MPs were causing harm by not taking the climate crisis seriously enough.
**Why attack News Corp?**

XR accuse Rupert Murdoch, the owner of News Corp, of failing to provide truthful coverage in his newspapers. The group believe that the free press is under attack from what they describe as a ‘failing authoritarian government’.

**The political response**

Boris Johnson, himself a newspaper reporter and columnist before moving into politics, defended the necessity of a free press in holding the government to account. In a tweet the PM described attempts to limit people’s access to the news as ‘completely unacceptable’. Sir Keir Starmer agreed and described a free press as ‘a cornerstone of democracy’ which needs protecting and said that it was wrong to deny people the chance to read what they want.

**How did the cabinet respond?**

There was division in the cabinet about how to respond to the blockade. The PM vowed to look at passing new laws to prevent pillars of democracy, including newspapers, from being targeted by activists. Priti Patel, home secretary, wanted to label XR an organised crime group in order to restrict their activities. However, foreign secretary Dominic Raab said that existing laws were enough to tackle any criminal behaviour that XR activists engaged in.

**Did all politicians oppose the actions of XR?**

Some Labour backbench MPs including Dawn Butler and Diane Abbott defended XR: in a tweet, Butler praised their actions, but later deleted the tweet after Starmer released his statement condemning the group’s actions. Abbott compared the XR protesters to suffragettes and emphasised that direct action is a legal tactic.

**Division within XR**

Not everyone within XR agreed with the attack on News Corp. Rupert Read, one of the group’s leaders, accused hard-left organisations such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Young Communist League (YCL) of trying to infiltrate XR to further their own political agenda. The XR publication *Challenge* was keen to reject any link with the SWP or YCL. The attack on News Corp was seen by some to antagonise the right-wing press and to make a political statement, contradicting XR’s aim of being apolitical. However, other members — especially in the regional branches and youth wing — believe that climate change can only be combated by a more radical change in the political system overall.

Former MP Ben Goldsmith, a financier, environmentalist and donor to XR, fears that the group may lose public support as a result of its recent shock tactics and may put people off engaging with environmental issues. However, a spokesperson for XR said that the blockade on News Corp was one of the most universally supported decisions made within the group.

**Questions for debate**

1. Would you describe Extinction Rebellion as a pressure group or a social movement?
2. Is direct action a justified means of protest?
3. Is Extinction Rebellion a successful group?