



Greta Thunberg: Climate Activist

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School Strike for the Climate

Swedish lawmakers meet to govern their country in a building known as the Riksdagshuset—in English, the Parliament House. The huge, ornate building was erected more than a century ago. Visitors approaching the building are greeted first by a row of towering concrete columns that stand across the front of the structure. On the morning of August 20, 2018, Greta Thunberg left her home in Stockholm, riding her bicycle across town to Parliament House. She wore a blue hoodie and leopard print pants. She sat down in front of the building on the hard cobblestone sidewalk. Thunberg propped a handmade sign against the wall of the Parliament House. The sign said, “Skolstrejk för klimatet.” In English, the message translates to “School Strike for the Climate.”

Thunberg decided not to go to school that day. In fact, she decided to stay out of school until September 9, 2018, the day of the Swedish election for seats in Parliament. She planned to protest the Swedish government’s failure to address climate change.

At first, members of the Swedish parliament and others wandered by, most barely offering a glance to the lone teenager sitting next to her handcrafted sign. Some asked her why she wasn’t in school. When she

told them she was staging a school strike to save the climate, most shrugged their shoulders and kept walking. After a few hours she tried a new strategy. When she was asked the meaning of her sign, Thunberg launched into a brief speech she hoped would alert people to the dangers of climate change. She also reminded them that an election was approaching—and to use their votes to support candidates who would take action on the issue of climate change. “Much of the world’s population does not have the slightest idea what climate change means to us,”¹³ she declared. Alas, her speeches didn’t seem to raise much interest among passersby, either. Finally, at 3 p.m., she went home.

“Much of the world’s population does not have the slightest idea what climate change means to us.”¹³

—Greta Thunberg

The Swedes Take Notice

Thunberg’s school strike had been inspired by the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, who organized a national student walkout on April 20, 2018, to protest against ineffective gun control laws in America. Organized through numerous social media platforms, hundreds of thousands of students in all fifty states walked out of school that day. Thunberg’s walkout was a solitary affair, but she was undaunted by the cool reception she received as she sat outside Parliament House on that first day. She returned the next morning and took her seat on the cobblestone sidewalk, again propping up her sign against the wall. This time she was approached by some news reporters who asked her what she was up to. Thunberg told the reporters she was staging a school strike to call attention to climate change. The reporters remained with her for several hours, watching as she again made pleas to members of Parliament and others as they walked by. Stories about Thunberg’s campaign appeared in the next day’s newspapers and other Swedish media. Soon, she found others joining her for the protest outside Parliament House. Within a few days, about forty

Almost every Friday since August 2018, Thunberg has skipped school and protested climate change by sitting in front of Sweden's Parliament House. Referring to her strike as "Fridays for Future," she has inspired other young people to stage similar protests in their countries.

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people had joined the protest. Stories about the growing protests were reported daily in the Swedish media.

Thunberg's climate strike gained attention with the help of social media as well. Starting with the first day of the strike she posted photos of herself, sitting in front of the Parliament House, on her Instagram and Twitter accounts. The message under the Instagram photo explained why she didn't go to school that day. It said, "We children don't usually do what you grown-ups tell us to do. We do as you do. And since you don't [care] about my future, I don't [care] either."¹⁴ Others shared her posts. The posts soon came to the attention of Ingmar Rentzhog, a wealthy entrepreneur and environmentalist. He joined her at the protest and used his widespread influence on his Facebook and Twitter accounts to spread the message. Within a few days, some two hundred thousand people were reading posts about the climate strike on social media platforms.

Swedish high school student Mayson Persson, fifteen, says she joined Thunberg at Parliament House the morning after she first read about the climate strike on social media. “I was there at her side,” Persson says. “I have, for a few years, had an interest in the climate and have chosen to not travel by airplane or eat meat in order to lessen my impact on the climate. I joined Greta because youths are strong but we are even stronger together.”¹⁵

Fridays for Future

Thunberg’s strike for climate change was now national news in Sweden. Finally, the September 9 elections arrived and Swedes went to the polls. Thunberg and the others who had joined her in the protest were disheartened that few candidates for the Swedish parliament talked about climate change as they campaigned for office. Thunberg’s original plan was to return to school following the election, but by now she realized her mission to raise awareness about climate change was just beginning. Thunberg did return to school, but going forward she vowed to skip school every Friday to carry on her protest against climate change. Thunberg decided to call the new phase of the campaign “Fridays for Future.”

“I joined Greta because youths are strong but we are even stronger together.”¹⁵

—Mayson Persson, fifteen-year-old Swedish high school student

The message soon spread across Sweden. Now, thousands of Swedish students were joining her by skipping school every Friday. By the end of the year, the message spread to other European nations as well. Tens of thousands of school students from numerous European countries started skipping school on Fridays to protest the failure of their governments to address climate change. And they were doing more than just staying home from school. The students met in front of governmental buildings in their capital cities to rally and demand action by their countries’ lawmakers to address the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

In January 2019, Fridays for Future rallies drew one hundred thousand young people in Brussels, Belgium, and eighty thousand in Paris, France. “We come here with the right intentions, to protest in peace and to raise awareness about climate change,

“We come here with the right intentions, to protest in peace and to raise awareness about climate change, because we want to be on the right side of history.”¹⁶

—Elisa Kiambi, nineteen-year-old participant at a climate rally in Brussels, Belgium

because we want to be on the right side of history,” said nineteen-year-old Elisa Kiambi at a rally in Brussels. “It is time for the government to act.”¹⁶ Meanwhile, in Berlin, Germany, ten thousand young people braved winter temperatures to rally in front of the government headquarters of the Ministry of Economics and Technology. The ministry helps set national policy in Germany on the amount of pollutants that industries are permitted to release into the atmosphere.

“We tell people, dress warmly, because we are only getting started,”¹⁷ said Luisa Neubauer, a twenty-two-year-old university student who helped organize the protests in Berlin.

The Extinction Rebellion

While the Fridays for Future strikes were being staged across Europe, Thunberg found herself very much in demand to appear at the rallies and address the huge crowds. On October 31, 2018, she was invited to speak at a rally in London, England, organized by an activist environmental group known as Extinction Rebellion.

The Thunbergs went to London as a family, driving in an electric car they had purchased. Electric cars are powered by batteries and electric motors, not gasoline-burning internal combustion engines, and therefore the vehicles do not emit carbon dioxide pollution. The drive took eight hours from Stockholm to the city of Calais, France. There the Thunbergs boarded a train that traveled the rest of the way to London through the Chunnel, the 31-mile (50 km) tunnel beneath the English Channel that connects France and Great Britain. The train ride took another two hours. If



In January 2019 Thunberg gave an address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. She spoke about how old methods of producing energy (burning coal, oil, and natural gas) have resulted in high greenhouse gas emissions.

the Thunbergs had chosen to fly from Stockholm to London, the flight would have taken less than three hours. But jetliners emit carbon dioxide pollution, and the Thunbergs had decided they would no longer contribute to climate change.

Arriving in London, Thunberg found herself facing a crowd of one thousand protesters in the city's Parliament Square. She told the protesters that she first learned about climate change as a young girl. She said,

I remember thinking that it was very strange, that humans who are an animal species among others, could be capable of changing the earth's climate. Because, if we were

and if it was really happening, we wouldn't be talking about anything else. As soon as you turned on the TV, everything would be about that. Headlines, radio, newspapers. You would never read or hear about anything else. As if there was a world war going on.

But no one ever talked about it. Ever. If burning fossil fuels was so bad, that it threatened our very existence, how could we just continue like before? Why were there no restrictions? Why wasn't it made illegal? To me, that did not add up. It was too unreal.¹⁸

Waiting Is Not an Option

Six weeks after the Extinction Rebellion rally, Thunberg was invited to address a much different type of group. Meeting in Katowice, Poland, in December 2018, organizers of the UN Climate Change Conference asked her to speak before the delegates. The conference is an annual meeting of UN officials and others tasked with assessing the progress nations have made in stemming the rise of climate change.

An invitation to speak before a UN body provided Thunberg with an audience composed not of protesting school students but of government leaders. The Thunbergs drove their electric car from Stockholm to Katowice—a distance of 628 miles (1,010 km)—in order to avoid flying in a commercial jetliner. When the Thunbergs arrived, they were welcomed by Polish students who had walked out of their classes to personally greet Greta. “Adults sometimes forget about the young people,”¹⁹ said Małgorzata Czachowska, one of the Polish students who was there.

Many of the students held signs that said “12 Years Left,” a reference to a 2018 study that had been released by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. That study stated that leaders of government and industry must make substantial changes in reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 or else the effects of climate change would not be reversible.

Greta Thunberg and the Electric Car

Electric cars are powered by batteries. Unlike vehicles powered by gasoline, electric cars do not emit carbon dioxide. But although most auto manufacturers offer electric vehicles for sale, they are still rarely seen on streets and highways. Statistics released in 2019 by the US Energy Information Administration show that electric vehicles comprise just 2.1 percent of global auto sales.

Greta Thunberg's parents purchased an electric car so they could drive her to climate activism events throughout Europe. And when Thunberg arrived in America in August 2019 to speak before the United Nations and other organizations, film star and former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger provided Thunberg with an electric car so she could attend events throughout the US.

Thunberg is not alone in her desire to go by electric vehicle only. Insiders in the motor vehicle industry report that it is becoming harder to sell gasoline-powered vehicles to young people. "Everyone I know under 25 isn't the slightest bit interested in cars," says Jeremy Clarkson, host of the British car-themed television series *The Grand Tour*. "Greta Thunberg has killed the car show. They're taught at school, before they say 'Mummy and Daddy,' that cars are evil, and it's in their heads."

Quoted in Colin Beresford, "Activist Greta Thunberg Wins Accolades, Insults for Promoting EVs," *Car and Driver*, December 11, 2019. www.caranddriver.com.

Invited to Davos

During the Katowice meeting, Thunberg scolded the UN delegates for not taking definitive action to stem the emission of greenhouse gases. "You are not mature enough to tell it like is," she said at the UN meeting. "Even that burden you leave to us children. But I don't care about being popular. I care about climate justice and the living planet."²⁰

A few weeks after the Katowice meeting, yet another group of influential leaders invited Thunberg to address their meeting. This time, the invitation came from the World Economic Forum

Source Notes

Introduction: Greta Thunberg: *Time's* Person of the Year

1. Edward Felsenthal, "The Choice," *Time*, December 23–December 30, 2019, p. 48.
2. Quoted in Charlotte Alter, Susan Haynes, and Justin Worland, "The Conscience," *Time*, December 23–December 30, 2019, p. 50.
3. Elizabeth Weise, "'How Dare You?' Read Greta Thunberg's Emotional Climate Change Speech to UN and World Leaders," *USA Today*, September 23, 2018. www.usatoday.com.
4. Quoted in Kerry Flynn, "Time Person of the Year: Climate Crisis Activist Greta Thunberg," CNN, December 11, 2019. www.cnn.com.

Chapter One: The Climate Crisis Comes to Stockholm

5. Quoted in Amelia Tait, "Greta Thunberg: How One Teenager Became the Voice of the Planet," *Wired*, June 6, 2019. www.wired.co.uk.
6. Quoted in Michael Part, *The Greta Thunberg Story: Being Different Is a Superpower*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sole Books, 2019, p. 17.
7. Quoted in Alter, Haynes, and Worland, "The Conscience," p. 58.
8. Quoted in Alter, Haynes, and Worland, "The Conscience," p. 58.
9. Quoted in Andrew C. Revkin, "Special Report: Endless Summer—Living with the Greenhouse Effect," *Discover*, June 23, 2008. www.discovermagazine.com.

Important Events in the Life of Greta Thunberg

2003

January 3: Greta Thunberg is born in Stockholm, Sweden.

2015

May 21: Thunberg's mother, opera star Malena Ernman, discloses in a newspaper interview that her daughter has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

2018

May: Thunberg wins an essay contest sponsored by a Stockholm newspaper that invited students to write about the dangers of climate change.

August 20: Thunberg skips school to begin her School Strike for the Climate protest in front of Parliament House in Stockholm.

September 9: Thunberg begins the Fridays for Future protest, skipping school each Friday to campaign against climate change.

October 31: Thunberg addresses the Extinction Rebellion protest in London, England.

December 3: Thunberg addresses the UN Climate Change Conference in Katowice, Poland.

2019

January 24: Thunberg addresses the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

March 14: Three members of the Norwegian parliament nominate Thunberg for the Nobel Peace Prize.

For Further Research

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