

Teen activist says leaders not ‘mature enough’ to take action on climate change



Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, 15, speaks to protesters Dec. 8 at the “March for Climate” in Katowice, Poland. (Alik Keplicz/AP)

By **Siobhán O’Grady**

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When Greta Thunberg, a 15-year-old climate activist from Sweden, had the chance to address a global climate change conference this past week, she told officials she had not come there to beg.

“You have ignored us in the past, and you will ignore us again,” she said.

“You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes.”

Her remarks quickly gained attention on social media, and video of her speech was shared by leading climate scientists and elected officials. U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) [tweeted footage of her address](#), saying she “called out world leaders for their global inaction on climate change.”



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Goosebumps! 15 year old activist [@GretaThunberg](#) speaks truth to power at the UN [#COP24](#) climate talks: "You say you love your children above all else, and yet you're stealing their future before their very eyes."

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Thunberg accused leaders of speaking only about “green eternal economic growth because you are too scared of being unpopular.”

“You only talk about moving forward with the same bad ideas that got us into this mess even when the only sensible thing to do is pull the emergency brake,” she said. “You are not mature enough to tell it like it is.”

The 15-year-old spoke on behalf of Climate Justice Now, a global network of climate advocacy groups. Officials from nearly 200 countries gathered in Poland over the past two weeks to “nudge the world toward stronger targets for reducing carbon emissions and enshrine a clearer set of rules for how to get there,” [The Post reported this week](#).

[Scientists called for 'unprecedented' action. But the global climate talks aren't built for that.]

Thunberg might be young, but she’s already spent years working as a climate activist.

She first attracted media attention earlier this year when she went on strike from school, holding a sign outside the Swedish parliament building in Stockholm that read, “school strike for climate.” [The New Yorker reported](#) that Thunberg spent three weeks sitting in front of parliament during school hours, and later returned to classes for four days a week while continuing to protest on Fridays.

The jury for the Children’s Climate Prize [wrote that she was nominated as a finalist this year](#) because she has “shown more determination, dedication and strength in combating climate change and working for the future of humanity than most adults or politicians ever do.”

[However, on Twitter, Greta asked to be removed from the list of finalists](#), noting that most people would have to fly to the awards ceremony. “All finalists are to be flown in from all over the world, to be a part of a ceremony, has no connection with reality,” she wrote. “Our generation will never be able to fly (among other things), other than for emergencies. Because the adult generations have used up all our carbon budget.”

Her family uses an electric car only when absolutely necessary. Otherwise, Greta uses her bicycle, [the New Yorker wrote in a profile of her](#). Those are sacrifices she’s willing to make.

“Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury,” she said this week. “It is the suffering of many that pay for the luxuries of few.”

The Fifteen-Year-Old Climate Activist Who Is Demanding a New Kind of Politics



By Masha Gessen [October 2, 2018](#)



Greta Thunberg's protest outside of Sweden's parliament building has made climate change a topic of that country's daily conversation. Photograph by Anders Hellberg

Sometimes the world makes so little sense that the only thing to do is engage in civil disobedience—even in a country as attached to its rules and regulations as Sweden is. Fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg has been protesting for more than a month. Before the country's parliamentary election on September 9th, she went on strike and sat on the steps of the parliament building, in Stockholm, every day during school hours for three weeks. Since the election, she has returned to school for four days a week; she now spends her Fridays on the steps of parliament. She is demanding that the government undertake a radical response to climate change. She told me that a number of members of parliament have come out to the steps to express support for her position, although every one of them has said that she should really be at school. Her parents think so, too, she said—that she should really go to school, though she is right to protest.

Thunberg's parents are Svante Thunberg, an actor, and Malena Ernman, a very well-known opera singer. Ernman has published a book in which she described her family's struggle with her two daughters' special needs: both Greta and her younger sister, Beata, have been diagnosed with autism, A.D.H.D., and other conditions. In part because of her mother's fame and the publicity that surrounded the publication of her book, Greta's protest serves a dual purpose. It not only calls attention to climate policy, as she intended, but it also showcases the political potential of neurological difference. "I see the world a bit different, from another perspective," she explained to me, in English. "I have a special interest. It's very common that people on the autism spectrum have a special interest."

Thunberg developed her special interest in climate change when she was nine years old and in the third grade. "They were always talking about how we should turn off lights, save water, not throw out food," she told me. "I asked why and they explained about climate change. And I thought this was very strange. If humans could really change the climate, everyone would be talking about it and people wouldn't be talking about anything else. But this wasn't happening." Thunberg has an uncanny ability to concentrate, which she also attributes to her autism. "I can do the same thing for hours," she said. Or, as it turns out, for years. She began researching climate change and has stayed on the topic for six years. She has stopped eating meat and buying anything that is not absolutely necessary. In 2015, she stopped flying on airplanes, and a year later, her mother followed suit, giving up an international performing career. The family has installed solar batteries and has started growing their own vegetables on an allotment outside the city. To meet me in central Stockholm, Thunberg and her father rode their bikes for about half an hour; the family has an electric car that they use only when necessary.

Sweden prides itself on having some of the most progressive climate legislation in the world: policies adopted over the last couple of years aim to make Sweden "the first fossil-free welfare state in the world." But there was relatively little discussion of climate policy in the lead-up to the September election, even after Sweden was hit with an unprecedented heat wave and catastrophic fires in July. Karin Bäckstrand, a climate-policy

researcher at Stockholm University, told me that climate policy wasn't an election issue precisely because a broad national consensus exists. "Everyone except the [far right] Swedish Democrats agree that we should become fossil-free," she said.

Thunberg calls bullshit on the consensus. In our conversation, she pointed out that, despite Sweden's progressive legislation and the scientific consensus that rich countries must cut their emissions by fifteen per cent a year, in Sweden actual emissions had gone up 3.6 per cent in the first quarter of this year. She has written a ~~piece~~ called "Sweden is not a role model," in which she points out that even the best-laid plans to address climate change make no attempt to look beyond the year 2050. "By then I will, in the best case, not even have lived half my life," she wrote. "What happens next?"

It's true that emissions have risen this year, Bäckstrand said, because Sweden is experiencing an economic boom. On the other hand, the country has cut its emissions by twenty-six per cent since 1990, even while its economy has grown. In just ten years, Sweden has increased its use of renewable sources of energy by twelve per cent. The country is building the world's first fossil-free steel plants. (To put this in context, Bäckstrand noted that she had just returned from San Francisco, where more than twenty thousand people, including the representatives of dozens of national governments, attended the Global Climate Action Summit, but no one from the Trump Administration attended; "Trump didn't even tweet about it!" Bäckstrand said. Bäckstrand added that Thunberg's "voice is needed, because until the fires and the drought, climate change was priority number eight for Swedes. She is arguing that it should be at the top, and she is right." Thunberg's strike has received extensive coverage in Sweden; for the time being, she is a household name, and climate change is a topic of daily conversation.

Thunberg's is a voice of unaccommodating clarity that reminds me of Soviet-era dissidents. I suspect that some of them were also on the spectrum, which in their case meant acting irrationally in the framework of the Soviet system—risking their lives to make the doomed demand that the country act in accordance with its written laws and declared ideals. Thunberg smiled in recognition when I told her this. "I can become very angry when I see things that are wrong," she said. On a recent class trip to a museum exhibit on climate change, for example, she noticed that some figures in the show—statistics on the carbon footprint of meat production, for example—were wrong. "I became very angry, but I'm quiet, so I just went to the exit and sat there by the doors. I didn't say anything until people asked me." In general she prefers action to conversation. In undertaking her school strike, she was inspired by the protests staged by American high-school students in response to the Parkland shooting this year—Thunberg's sit-in is also a walkout.

When Thunberg is at her now-famous post outside of parliament, people come by to talk to her and bring her food. This has had an unexpected effect: Thunberg, who generally eats the same things every day, has tried new food. She surprised herself by doing this, and by finding that she likes falafel and noodles.

In the weeks since the election, the Swedish political conversation has centered on topics far from climate change: the main centrist parties finished in a dead heat, making a far-right party, the Swedish Democrats, which came in third, a potential power broker. Formerly rote procedures such as choosing the speaker of parliament and appointing cabinet members have come to overshadow any policy discussion. Thunberg is peculiarly uninterested in this, though. "I think the election didn't matter," she told me. "The climate is not going to collapse because some party got the most votes. The politics that's needed to prevent the climate catastrophe—it doesn't exist today. We need to change the system, as if we were in crisis, as if there were a war going on."