THE AGE OF activist

Trump in the White House, Brexit on the agenda and an Opposition in crisis. No wonder Londoners are taking matters into their own hands. Charlie Gilmour reports on the capital’s political awakening

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n our godless age, many visit churches only for a birth, a death or a wedding. It’s for none of these reasons that, on a crisp Thursday evening, hundreds of ordinary Londoners are crammed into St Pancras New Church — but the occasion is no less monumental. After all, what single recent event has impacted people’s lives more than the election of Donald Trump? At this, the first public meeting of the Stop Trump Coalition, it’s standing room only.

Everyone, it turns out, wants to do something about Trump and the issues he’s raised. It’s not just the same old tired activists. There are young professionals in office clothes, well-to-do housewives, OAPs, a couple of TV actors (including the guy who plays Dale Mayli in The Revolution Will Be Televised), artists, caregivers and at least one MP (Tulip Siddiq, Hampstead and Kilburn) alongside more obviously seasoned activists.

After a series of brief speeches from representatives of organisations including Friends of the Earth as well as the journalist Owen Jones, we break away into discussion groups. What to do about Donald? Greet him with drag queens, blast him with trumpets, smash his businesses to smithereens: the answers are as gloriously mixed as London itself.

Londoners from all walks of life are embracing activism in a way that hasn’t been seen since the anti-war movement 14 years ago. On the day of the presidential inauguration the Bridges Not Walls campaign saw every central London bridge draped with messages such as ‘Migrants Welcome Here’, ‘Queer Solidarity Smashes Borders’ and ‘Unite Against Islamophobia’. Peaceful marches such as the Women’s March the very next day, in which 100,000 people took to the streets of the capital, have shown others that they do not stand alone. And rallies such as the more recent protests against the ‘Muslim-ban’ saw an estimated 30,000 converge on Downing Street and 11,000 on the American embassy on two separate days, helping to cement the movement. Next month a march from Tavistock Square to Parliament organised by Health Campaigns Together and anti-austerity group The People’s Assembly to protest against, among other issues, budget cuts and hospital closures, is expected to be the biggest demonstration the NHS has ever seen.

But these gatherings feel different from other protests of recent years. After the crisis in activism triggered by the Iraq War, when one million people marched and still the bombs fell, as well as the chaotic frenzy of the student and anti-austerity movements, Londoners have hit their marching stride. Actors such as Sharon Horgan and

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Gillian Anderson, sports stars like Chris Robshaw and Gary Lineker, and politicians including Sadiq Khan sprinkled stardust on proceedings, but a DIY attitude prevails. With handmade signs and improvised slogans (‘Super callous fragile racist sexist Nazi POTUS’), British humour has been on parade.

Professional protesters these are not. Indeed, for many at the meeting of the Stop Trump Coalition (a loose association of more than 100 journalists, activists, artists and MPs), Sadiq Khan

![Image of protesters with handmade signs]

![Image of a person holding a sign reading "Rise Against"]
this is their first experience of activism. I meet Notting Hill-based PR consultant Laura Elvin, 29, who says she had never been on a protest until, appalled by Trump’s executive order stopping immigration from seven majority-Muslim countries, she found herself waving a placard outside Downing Street. ‘Trump has really brought these issues to the fore. He’s a symbol we can unite against.’

Lately, even the genteel denizens of Kensington and Chelsea have been driven to the barricades. According to one witness, when The London Forum, an organisation known for hosting Holocaust deniers and Hitler admirers, came to the Kensington Holiday Inn earlier this month, local ladies reinforced the masked protesters — members of the London Anti-Fascists — with tea and cake from Waitrose. The art world has joined the fight, too. This month an international coalition of artists, musicians and writers including Mark Wallinger, Miranda July, David Byrne, and Michael Stipe launched ‘Rallys Off Our Revolution’, a radical manifesto for change that declares its intention to use art to create a vision of a better world.

What’s going on? Part of the answer lies in the events of recent years. The aftermath of the economic crisis and subsequent belt-tightening undoubtedly created dissatisfaction in some quarters. There have been unprecedented strikes by doctors and lawyers. Then 2016 came along: ‘Whether it was the increase in hate crime, Brexit or the rise of Trumpism, 2016 was a bit like being kicked repeatedly in the head,’ says author Matt Carr, 61, spokesman for One Day Without Us, a migrant-organised national strike and day of action that saw more than 100 events celebrating migrant workers planned around the country last Monday. ‘There’s a genuine sense of alarm — and a real willingness to do something about it.’

Trump in particular has been a flashpoint. Perhaps because people have found themselves having to defend things, such as the science behind global warming or women’s rights, that once seemed secure. ‘I have to thank Donald Trump for one thing,’ says Friends of the Earth’s Asad Rehman at the Stop Trump meeting. ‘He’s an equal-opportunities hater. He hates all of us, and that’s at least brought all of us together.’

Other events closer to home have also caused alarm, notably Brexit — opposed by a majority of Londoners — the Government’s seeming reluctance to guarantee the rights of EU residents, and the decision to admit no more than 350 child refugees under the Dubs Amendment.

But there’s more to the new culture of activism than a reaction to circumstance. The election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader has prompted centre-left supporters to abandon the party in droves (recent research by YouGov showed Labour trailing the Conservatives by almost 20 points) and left the opposition crippling divided in Parliament. Without a credible electoral threat to the incumbent Government, those who disagree with the status quo are having to look outside the traditional party system.

Meanwhile, although it is not new, social media is being used more effectively than ever to put boots on the ground. When, in response to the so-called ‘Muslim ban’, Owen Jones put a 3am call-out on Twitter and Facebook for a protest, it took off like wildfire. An estimated 10,000 people marched in Whitehall the next day, with thousands more in other cities around the UK. At least 7,300 people have RSVP’d to the NHS protest ‘event’ on Facebook.

Of course, the real question is, will any of it make a difference? Dr Katrina Navickas, historian of protest and popular politics at the University of Hertfordshire, points out that recent protests have been more effective than most in unifying disparate groups: ‘Because the focus is now on grass-roots, local participation — anyone can take part in a local demo or sign an online petition rather than having to trek down to London for the day to protest in front of Westminster. It is empowering.’ However, she warns that ‘whether these actions will change the Government’s decisions’ is another matter entirely. ‘At some point people are going to have to think about what their ultimate vision is,’ adds the LSE’s Professor David Graeber, an anthropologist of activist movements and leading figure in Occupy Wall Street. ‘What do they actually want to see in the world?’

Small victories have already been won: a petition calling on Parliament to cancel Trump’s state visit gained almost two million signatures. Although the Government has formally rejected its demand, MPs were, at the time of going to press, set to debate the issue — undoubtedly embarrassing for the President. Last week it was reported...
that his controversial state visit could move from London to the pro-Brexit Midlands — again, an embarrassment. And the ‘resistance’ has won itself some unlikely allies — to wit, John Bercow’s statement to the Commons opposing the suggestion that Trump might speak there.

In the short term the protests show little sign of abating. The nascent Stop Trump Coalition has crowdfunded more than £16,000 for its war kitty and is about to announce thousands more in trade-union funding. There is the NHS March next month, as well as the One Day Without Us migrant-worker action. And wherever Trump visits he will, say the STC’s organisers, be greeted by the ‘biggest protest against racism and hatred in our country’s history’. For now, it seems, the rebels are here to stay.
Anti-Trump protesters have included famous Londoners such as Sir Ian McKellen and the Mayor, Sadiq Khan.