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## Forget polar bears – the new Friends of the Earth boss prefers talking about Palestine

Asad Rehman, the environmental body's new chief executive, aims to reframe the climate campaign around class, race and social justice



202



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Asad Rehman addresses a pro-Palestine rally in 2017 Credit: Mark Kerrison/Alamy

**Emily Retter**

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Those polar bears still clinging to sea ice might want to cover their ears.

Friends of the Earth, the environmental campaign group, has a newly appointed chief executive with a bold vision for climate action – one that, surprisingly, doesn't put saving our Arctic pals at the top of the list.

For Asad Rehman, a lifelong social justice activist who has built a career hopscotching between causes ranging from poverty to police brutality, and who this month has taken the helm of the 56-year-old eco organisation, tackling the climate crisis isn't about saving bears.

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Nor, as he has explained in the past, is it about “the right light bulbs” or avoiding “plastic straws”. In fact, the group's first leader of colour has described himself as a “reluctant environmentalist”.

In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2021, the working-class activist from Burnley, Lancashire – who began campaigning as a boy in the 1980s when he organised school strikes of Asian children in response to abhorrent racist abuse – said tokenistic approaches to the climate crisis never resonated with him or with many from his background. “It was framed as about saving polar bears or whatever, and of really only being a concern to white, middle-class environmentalists,” he said.

So, those worried about the future of our planet might ask: what *does* chime?

Well, the fate of Palestine certainly ranks high among his concerns. A glance at Rehman's X feed shows a “Stop Genocide, Save Palestine” emblem in place of a profile photograph, alongside a string of posts about this month's arrests of protesters under what he calls “draconian anti-terror legislation”.

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He has taken the cause to climate conferences, too. At Cop28 in Dubai in December 2023, he faced restrictions on a speech calling for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, stating that “the Palestinian struggle is woven into every struggle for justice, including climate justice”.



Rehman at a 'global climate strike' in London in 2021 Credit: Mark Kerrison/Alamy

Rehman also posts regular messages about racial and social injustice on social media. And in an interview with Times Radio earlier this month, he stressed the importance of diversity, arguing that the climate movement has become too white and middle class. “If we want to be a force for change, you have to look like and be part of the fabric of this country – and that is diverse and it’s diverse in class, it’s diverse in ethnicity, diverse geographically,” he said.

Although he spent 10 years as Friends of the Earth's "head of international climate" before moving in 2017 to his role as director of the anti-poverty charity War on Want, Rehman is clear he is no traditional green campaigner. Instead, he says "climate justice" cannot be achieved without first levelling the social playing field and taxing the rich proportionately.

"We must show that the fight for climate and nature is inseparable from achieving true social and economic justice," he wrote on the Friends of the Earth website when his appointment was announced. "That the same forces driving environmental breakdown are keeping many locked into poverty and hardship."

Rehman believes that the "powerful multinationals" in rich, white countries profit from the climate crisis, while those with black and brown skin, who contribute least, suffer the greatest impact. In the 2021 *Guardian* interview, he described this as "racialised capitalism", adding: "You cannot understand the climate crisis without understanding that there is an arch from slavery to colonialism and imperialism to the climate crisis."

He speaks passionately and articulately – convincingly, to his supporters. But he may baffle others.

Sam Hall, director of the Conservative Environment Network, believes Rehman's stance could be damaging. The former policy adviser to Michael Gove, when the latter was secretary of state for the environment, food and rural affairs, says Rehman's loud championing of social causes will polarise the climate campaign.

The diversity the environmental movement actually needs, Hall says, is "political diversity" – more supporters from the Right. And Rehman's politicised words, he warns, will "lose people". One thing climate change is not, Hall insists, is "woke".



Sam Hall, director of the Conservative Environment Network, believes Rehman's charged rhetoric on climate change will 'lose people' Credit: Russell Hart/Alamy

But, “linking it to woke issues risks portraying it as such, alienating people on the Right of the spectrum, and drawing people into a culture war which risks polarisation.

“To have climate policy that is to endure and succeed you need buy-in from across the political spectrum; that's going to include people with socially conservative views who might find some of these Left-wing ideas around race and social justice off-putting.”

This is all the more important when Reform threatens to kibosh climate action altogether – a threat Rehman says “keeps him awake at night”.

Focus, Hall argues, should be on “finding the pragmatic solutions we need in an economically sensible way”.

He insists: “You have got to see business as part of the solution; they are the ones who are going to be innovating and investing in the solutions we need. I would argue we want to take a more market-led approach to tackling climate change, which creates the incentives and frameworks for the private sector to deliver the solutions, rather than one that is statist, which overrides consumer preference and risks crowding out the private sector.”

The messaging, he says, should be: “Wanting to hand on a good inheritance to our children and grandchildren; wanting to protect our landscapes and nature; wanting to enhance our security by being more self-reliant on our own sources of safe, reliable energy. Those messages are much more compelling.”

Rehman’s drive for social revolution is no surprise given his and his family’s harrowing experiences in the 1970s and 1980s in Burnley.

In an interview with the podcast series *Crash Course With Michael Walker* last year, he described the National Front selling its newspaper unchallenged inside his school: “I grew up at a time when literally every week our house would be attacked in one way or another [...] firebombed, windows smashed; you would be attacked on the way to school, in school [...] the fight was literally to be able to walk down the street free from attack.”

His father, a factory worker, would leave for work and his mother would then be “terrorised” in her home. Ethnic minorities, Rehman said, were blamed for the ills of industrialisation, “driven by Thatcher and neoliberalism, which was devastating working-class communities up and down the country” – communities of which they, too, were a part. After the school strikes, Rehman founded an Asian youth movement in his area.

He could not have been more disconnected from environmentalism, which he viewed as a “luxury” – a disconnect he says still exists in communities that are struggling with the cost of living today.

After working for the anti-racism group Newham Monitoring Project in the late 1980s, Rehman moved on to Amnesty International, campaigning heavily for reforms following the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and criticising the investigation into Jean Charles de Menezes, the Brazilian shot by the Met Police in 2005 after the July 7 terror attacks.

Author and human rights campaigner Yasmin Khan, a friend he worked alongside during that period, has described him as a “force of nature” with “political fierceness”.



and planet, the need to rapidly accelerate climate action couldn't be more urgent.

“We are witnessing a surge in extreme weather events battering communities here in the UK and overseas [...] climate breakdown is touching all our lives, whether we recognise it or not, through soaring food prices, sky-high energy bills, and poor-quality housing that leaves us exposed to blistering heat in the summer and bitter cold in the winter.”

He insists that “bringing communities closer together”, not polarisation, is his aim. “The climate emergency transcends party politics – there’s space for everyone in the fight for a fairer, greener, more prosperous future,” he says.

Perhaps, however, not for the polar bears.

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