

[Defender Profile: Will McCallum, United Kingdom](#)

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Will McCallum is 'Campaigner' at Greenpeace in the United Kingdom.

'I would say that it is the tactics we use are what provoke a backlash from the Government as much as the issues we work on. In the UK if you make full use of the freedom of information system or judicial reviews, then you are probably going to have speak out publicly about the failures of government policies. This is what puts you in the firing line'.

And as Greenpeace and other environmental groups have highlighted the risks to environmental rights implied by UK energy and climate policies, they have found themselves targets of derogatory statements from both authorities and the media, questioning the motives of their work. The [previous Environment Secretary](#) labelled them 'self-serving', 'highly paid globe-trotters' 'focusing on the wrong issues and doing real harm while profiting handsomely'. Yet Will says that this is actually emblematic of a broader governmental intolerance of civil society advocacy.

'There is a general background noise from the government which is anti-NGO; there's a sense of disrespect and there's been a marked difference since 2012. It's as if the government see questioning by civil society as a pain which ought to be kept in check. But dissent has its rightful place in a democracy and, in fact, we can help ensure the government makes policies which respect rights and protect the environment. There is a sense that in the UK the government would like to see the role of NGOs as one of simply service providers'.

This attitude has manifested itself not only in the governmental discourse, but also in legislation limiting NGO activities. Will points to the 2014 Lobbying Act, which put strong financial and administrative limitations on the advocacy work NGOs could do around election periods. [A recent letter](#) by 150 NGOs called for the law's repeal, following a recent [independent inquiry](#) into its impact.

'At least as concerning for us, however, is the current review of the Freedom of Information Act. Over 140 organisations [spoke out](#) last month in concern at apparent attempts to weaken the Act. The government has mandated a Commission to carry out the review, but almost all of its members are politicians and all have a track record of questioning the Act. Where's the balance? Where's the view of those of us who rely upon the Act to hold the government accountable?'

Will is concerned at suggestions that the Commission will recommend the implementation of fees for tribunal

appeals against freedom of information decisions, currently free.

'At Greenpeace we have a certain amount of resources we could invest in such appeals. But what's the impact for smaller organisations and grass-roots human rights defenders? They *rely* on this Act to demand better from the State'.

A lack of transparency and of proper consultation are two obstacles which make it difficult for organisations and communities to question the environmental impact of business projects, says Will.

'On the one hand, there is a failure by the government to be transparent regarding who they are being lobbied by and how; there is no effective lobbying register. Yet on the other hand there is a reluctance on the part of the State to listen to those communities and activists who are asking for an environmental perspective to be taken into account. The government wants to expedite business projects at all costs, as shown by a recent [change to planning guidance](#) which will allow central government to circumvent local authorities in the approval of fracking projects if the latter has taken more than 16 weeks to evaluate a project proposal'.

In an echo of a [disturbing global trend](#), another fear amongst environmental rights organisations in the UK, is the possible use of counter-terror and surveillance legislation to limit their activism. As the UK government pushes bills to clampdown on extremism, Will is concerned that some of the laws' vague terms and exceptional processes have the potential to be misapplied.

'The government has said that the Extremism Bill is to tackle what [falls below the legal threshold for terrorist proscription](#). There needs to be a clear articulation of what this means to ensure the law cannot be abused. Meanwhile, the [Policing and Criminal Justice Bill](#) provides for 90-day pre-trial detention. Any law which gives authorities who are relatively intolerant to dissent the power to lock people up before they've been judged must be subject to proper consultation of local civil society and international human rights experts before it is passed'.

It will also fall upon this government to make guarantees of no-repetition in the cases of [police spying and surveillance](#) of environmental groups which have led to a public inquiry into [undercover policing](#).

'But this is all part of a global trend of clamping down on civil society, particularly when it is seen as slowing the pace of business. Many of our colleagues from Greenpeace around the world are suffering far harsher consequences. In India, for example, the government has been making a [sustained attack on civil society organisations](#), including Greenpeace, for over a year now. In the UK we are in the relatively fortunate position of living in a country which has a rich history of protest and civic activism. That only makes it sadder that the government is following this trend and trying to silence us'.

Follow Will on Twitter at @artofactivism

In the weeks and days leading up to the UN Forum on Business and Human Rights, ISHR will publish a series of articles by leading experts including human rights defenders, UN representatives, diplomats, businesses and international NGOs. Each article will include an analysis of the important role of human rights defenders and will be compiled in a special edition of ISHR's Human Rights Monitor, to be launched in English, French and Spanish on November 9. The views expressed in the pieces are personal and do not necessarily represent the position of ISHR.