

Britain: Policing of climate camp a major attack on democratic rights

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A week-long climate protest camp in north Kent has ended, amidst widespread claims of disproportionate and aggressive policing. Around 100 people were arrested over the course of the protest, 46 of whom have been charged, mostly with obstruction offences. The multimillion-pound policing of the camp marked a significant attack on democratic rights and civil liberties.

The camp was held to protest the building of a new coal-fired power station at Kingsnorth, on the Medway estuary. Energy company E.ON UK is proposing replacing the existing coal power station with a new one. This would be the first new coal power station built in Britain in more than 30 years. The proposal has yet to be agreed by John Hutton, whose portfolio as secretary of state for business, enterprise and regulatory reform includes energy security issues. The proposal has been passed to Hutton's office following its agreement by the local authority, Medway Council.

Kingsnorth is the first of several new coal-fired power stations proposed for sites across the UK. The government has made these stations a key factor in ensuring energy supplies. Protestors argue that coal power stations, with their high CO2 emissions, are the most polluting means of producing electricity. Between 1,000 and 2,000 protestors came to the camp over the course of the week to protest at the development of Kingsnorth. Aside from their direct protest activities, the camp also staged workshop and discussion events.

Assistant Chief Constable Gary Beautridge of Kent Police acknowledged in a press conference that the police had been planning their response to the camp since April of this year. That response saw 1,400 officers, from 26 different forces across Britain, being brought into the area. They were supported by constant air surveillance. The Medway Ports Authority also

authorised the police to "enforce" sections of their bylaws to prevent protestors approaching the power station from the river.

The final cost of the policing operation is not yet known, but has been estimated variously between £1 million and £8 million. It is understood the Kent Police are considering applying to the Home Office for financial support in footing the bill.

There has been a noticeable trend in recent years for the police to underreport numbers of demonstrators and protestors. In the case of Kingsnorth, the police set the attendance at 1,000. According to their own figures, therefore, they had provided a level of policing intended to overwhelm the protestors. The organisers' own estimate of attendance was 1,500, giving a 1:1 ratio of police to protestors. Even the highest estimate only put attendance at 2,000.

That the police levels were aimed at discouraging protest was reinforced when Beautridge said he regarded "the majority of the protestors" as "law-abiding people there for a legitimate reason." He justified the policing levels as a response to "a small hard core of people...prepared to use criminal tactics and criminal activity." According to one report, this "small hard core" was set at just 150 people. As the camp's legal spokesman Kevin Smith noted, "Every year police use the supposed existence of a hardcore minority as justification for the heavy-handedness and every year this hardcore minority fails to materialise."

It is quite evident that the policing was aimed at deterring any form of protest. Protestors at the camp have described the constant attention of police helicopters, which served to disrupt meetings and speeches. There are also reports of police impounding vehicles being used by protestors to bring supplies into the camp.

In particular, protestors drew attention to the aggressive tactics of the riot police, who used batons and shields in making arrests. Several protestors were injured when police baton-charged them as they tried to enter a cornfield. Beautridge maintained that such a response was “proportionate.... Because of the level of resistance, officers were authorised to carry batons during two days of the protest. There are strict legal standards for their use and we gave clear warnings when any specialist team was deployed.”

Green MEP Caroline Lucas, who visited the camp, said she was “horrified that [the] police...have used pepper spray, riot gear, [and] physical intimidation.” The police controlled demonstrators with horses, dogs and trail bikes, as well as with constant helicopter coverage.

To sustain this level of intimidation and intrusion, the police sought extraordinary powers to stop and search protestors. Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act was implemented to authorise this. Initially, the Section 60 provisions were applied only to the immediate area of the camp. They were subsequently extended to cover the whole of the Hoo peninsula. The provision allows police to stop and search a suspect if an officer of superintendent rank or above believes there may be incidents of serious violence.

At Kingsnorth, Section 60 was used to monitor all visitors to the camp. One eyewitness describes joining a queue to be searched. The searching officer did not know who had authorised the searches. Having been frisked and had his bag searched, the witness was then issued with a pink slip. He had to show this to another three officers before he actually reached the camp. He was searched again when he tried to leave the camp. There were also reports of protestors being threatened with strip searches. Elsewhere there were reports of police attempting to use Section 60 to justify destruction of homemade rafts.

Lucas, along with Liberal Democrat MP Norman Baker and Labour MP Colin Challen, wrote to Kent Police to express concern about such use of discretionary powers. Lucas warned that this was “undermining our civil liberties.”

Lucas, amongst others, has also drawn attention to a booklet apparently dropped by an officer policing the camp. The booklet, “Policing Protest,” is produced by

the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit and offers “tactical advice and guidance on policing single-issue domestic extremism.”

Police mounted a systematic programme of confiscation from the protestors during the searches. The police told press that they had confiscated many knives, although demonstrators described this as a smear tactic. Police also showed journalists a satirical board game (“War on Terror”) they had confiscated. There seems to have been a policy of making life as uncomfortable and awkward as possible for protestors. Other items confiscated included glue, soap, a clown costume, bits of carpet, toilet paper, disabled ramps, marker pens, blackboard paint, nuts and bolts for toilet cubicles, and banners.

They also confiscated demonstrators’ emergency radios and lifejackets. One demonstrator involved in the river-borne protest described a meeting with a local coast guard crew. The coast guards were complimentary about the demonstrators’ attention to safety, but criticised the police confiscations of lifejackets, saying, “It was irresponsible and could have put lives at risk.”

Such tactics were clearly designed to stifle any form of dissent and deter any future protests. Of particular concern in this regard is the complaint by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) that its members were also subject to the same searches, manhandling, and observation. The NUJ is looking at legal challenges against “this unwarranted conduct by the police.” According to the NUJ, journalists were searched as they entered and left the camp. Searches continued after police were shown press cards. Journalists were also “pushed and shoved” by police, and filmed whilst using WiFi facilities at a local McDonalds.

Such developments indicate a determination to clamp down on any form of legitimate protest, and should be taken as a very serious attack on democratic rights.



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