

Britain: Propaganda campaign mounted to justify brutal G20 policing

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A concerted effort is being made to limit criticism of police actions during protests surrounding the G20 summit in London, and even to justify them.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) has been forced to mount several investigations into police violence during the demonstrations on April 1 and 2. These include an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of 47-year-old newspaper vendor Ian Tomlinson, who was making his way home from work on April 1 when he became caught up in a police “kettling” operation involving the forcible detention of hundreds of protesters in side-streets.

Police initially denied any contact with Tomlinson and a first post-mortem claimed that he had died from a heart attack. Video footage subsequently showed that the father of nine had been hit from behind by a masked police officer, causing him to fall and hit his head.

With eyewitness accounts indicating that this was only the last of three separate assaults on Tomlinson by police over a 90-minute period, Peter Smyth from the Police Federation questioned the “impartiality” of IPCC head Nick Hardwick.

After days of stalling, Hardwick and the IPCC had finally been pressed into action by the deluge of evidence showing indiscriminate police violence during the protests. At the weekend, Hardwick had registered the mildest of criticisms of policing during the G20. He said he had “serious concerns” about the supervision of officers at demonstrations, that it was “unacceptable” for officers to conceal their identification numbers and remarked that police needed to remember that they were “servants, not masters” of the people.

Decrying Hardwick’s “deplorable behaviour”, Smyth said Hardwick had donned “the mantle of witchfinder general” and was guilty of passing “lofty and withering judgment on London’s police officers.”

Earlier, London Mayor and Conservative Party member Boris Johnson had defended the G20 police operation. Johnson, who chairs the Metropolitan Police Authority, said,

“The overwhelming majority of people in this city and this country understand the particularly difficult situation they [the police] face when being asked to provide security in a demonstration such as the G20.”

Johnson was speaking alongside Metropolitan Police chief Sir Paul Stephenson, who claimed that police behaviour had to be placed “in context”. While there “have been some concerning images which need to be fully and properly investigated”, Stephenson said, “there needs to be a context here.

“That operation was one of the most complex policing operations that’s ever been undertaken—protecting multiple heads of state,” Stephenson stated, adding that it had also kept the public “largely safe” and prevented damage.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, Sir Ken Jones, president of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), said there was a need to approach the issue of policing “objectively and look at the issue from all perspectives.”

“I can’t find any other country that doesn’t use water cannon, CS gas, rubber bullets. Our approach is proportionate and, in fact, has delivered on many other occasions.”

“What I am saying is that the world is changing,” Jones continued. “The way that some people come to these protests now, particularly in Europe, and offer violence to people, to property, to other legitimate protesters, and, yes, they came to attack the police, this has become an increasingly difficult job for us to pull off.”

Home Office Minister Lord West concurred. British police tactics were better than “water cannon, baton rounds or shooting people—all of which seem to occur in some other countries,” he said.

“I am very proud of them [the police] and the way I approach it generally is they are on our side and they are our people.”

Separately, Paul McKeever, chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation, complained of an anti-police “bandwagon” surrounding the G20 protests. Officers had

faced “real provocation” during the demonstrations, he claimed.

Contempt for democratic rights

Such statements are testimony to the contempt for democratic rights within the political establishment and state.

The comments by West and Jones over policing in “other countries” are disingenuous, especially given the police killing of innocent Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes in July 2005. It was only after de Menezes was gunned down in full public view that it emerged the police had secretly adopted a shoot-to-kill policy under the guise of the “war on terror” some two years before. Police are also equipped with tasers and CS gas. Nor should it be forgotten that water cannon, CS gas and rubber bullets have all been deployed for decades in Northern Ireland.

More fundamentally, Jones’s accusation that protests are invariably aimed at “violence to people, to property” and to the police points to the degree to which political dissent is now officially regarded as criminal behaviour. Such is the degree of social polarisation, and the resulting political alienation, that any activity that questions the existing set-up is considered a threat, which should be responded to with force.

It was this, not Johnson’s claim of concerns for public safety that guided police operations during the protests. Forcible containment for hours at a time, beatings and the use of plain-clothes and masked, unidentifiable officers were intended to intimidate and punish those joining the demonstrations.

Nor is this confined to the G20 protests. Only days later, police carried out the unprecedented pre-emptive arrests of 114 people in Nottingham on “suspicion” that they had been planning an environmental protest.

Yet McKeever suggests in his comments that concerns over the implication of these unprecedented developments for civil liberties are bogus, illegitimate and part, presumably, of a left-wing inspired anti-police bandwagon.

Nobody should be deceived into believing that the public outcry over the police assaults on peaceful protesters will produce any let-up in the undermining of democratic rights. On the contrary, the statements by Johnson and senior police chiefs indicate that the representatives of the state apparatus intend to press ahead regardless.

They are encouraged in this by the perfidy of what passes for the official “workers” movement and Britain’s

nominally liberal elite.

Not a single leading member of the Labour Party or the trade unions has registered any public criticism of the police’s actions. It could not be otherwise, given that Labour has blazed the trail for the adoption of methods more akin to a police state as an integral part of its big business agenda.

The trade union bureaucracy may, on the odd occasion, shout about defending the “rights of British workers”. But this is only when such protestations serve the reactionary purpose of dividing the working class—as in the recent “Britons first” campaign. When it concerns protecting these rights against the state, however, there is silence.

A recent comment by Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty (formerly the National Council for Civil Liberties) in the *Times* newspaper, was noteworthy only for the extent to which she accepted the restricting of fundamental rights.

“The right to protest is precious but not unlimited,” she asserted, claiming that “[F]ew would argue against proportionate interferences with that right to protect people and property.”

“The use of force—when it is proportionate and necessary to make arrests and prevent harm to the police and public—can be reasonable,” she continued.

“But it is neither lawful nor productive to use violence against an individual protester, however annoying they are, because other people are misbehaving or an officer has lost his rag. As for the tactic of uniformed officers obscuring their identity numbers, the commissioner has clarified that this is unacceptable,” she went on lamely.

“The G20 demonstrations may prove a momentous moment in Britain’s surveillance culture”, she continued tritely, from which “we might all learn”. Video footage showing the police in action meant that they “will understand how it feels to be watched and the dangers of rushing from snatched images to judgment. We complainers are reminded that well-targeted surveillance has its place and that the right to privacy, like protest, is not unlimited.”



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