

British government seeks new powers to ban demonstrations

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In the aftermath of last week's Trades Union Congress demonstration in London, when around 500,000 people marched in opposition to the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government's £85 billion austerity and cuts package, the British government has launched a new campaign to curtail the right to protest.

Elementary rights are being threatened on the basis of incidents of vandalism and disorder, which took place away from the demonstration—mainly at venues associated with wealth and privilege, including the Ritz Hotel, banks and high street shops.

On Monday, Conservative Home Secretary Theresa May announced in an emergency House of Commons briefing that plans were being urgently considered, including giving the police new powers to issue “banning orders” to prevent people from attending rallies and marches. Other measures to be considered include giving the police further stop-and-search powers, forcing those attending protests to remove face-scarves, masks and balaclavas. Outlining the proposals, May said, “If the police need more help to do their work, I will not hesitate in granting it to them”.

The opposition Labour Party gave its support for such a crackdown. Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper said, “These incidents have been increasing every time there is a crowd event and frankly people are fed up of it”.

Labour MP Keith Vaz called for “bold and radical” measures to be introduced, stating, “We simply cannot go on like this.... It is for the police to tell us what needs to be done”.

Police powers are set to be extended as early as next month in time for the Royal wedding in London. Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Lynne Owens told the BBC that these powers could be granted

under Section 47a of the Terrorism Act 2000—directly linking domestic political protest with terrorism.

Despite the saturation media coverage given to these episodes, the most violent confrontations were, in fact, instigated by the police, who began kettling several thousand peaceful protesters who had gathered in Trafalgar Square.

Of the 201 people who were arrested on Saturday, 149 people have been charged with offences so far. The vast majority of these (138) were involved in a peaceful occupation of the luxury Fortnum & Mason store. The 138 have been charged with aggravated trespass. The brutal treatment meted out by the police was described in Wednesday's *Guardian* by one of those arrested. She described how “we were dragged away, arrested and taken to police stations around London”.

One of the protesters incarcerated was 15 years old.

“That protester, like me and many others, was locked in a cell for nearly 24 hours on the basis of evidence that was never presented to solicitors—solicitors who were not contacted until the next morning. In the early hours of the morning we were unexpectedly woken up and told to take off our clothes. When we asked why, we were simply told that the police had the right to seize our clothes and would be doing so”.

“Despite the fact that not a single protester was charged with a violent offence, or damage to property”, the police also took their mobile phones, along with DNA samples and fingerprints, she said.

Matt Foot, a criminal defence solicitor, commented, “It is unprecedented to arrest so many people for simply protesting peacefully in a building. And then it is intimidating to keep peaceful protesters for so long at the police station and then charge them so quickly without reviewing the evidence first”.

The mass arrest at Fortnum & Mason contrasts

sharply with the police treatment of those actually involved in the most serious disturbances, with only 11 people being charged.

Footage of Saturday's disorder from official news sources including the BBC, as well as video shot by individuals, shows squads of riot police just stood around whilst masked "anarchists" smashed windows and vandalised shop fronts. The *Daily Telegraph* was moved to ask, "Were enough arrests made? There are reports of troublemakers being wrestled to the ground by police, but then allowed to walk away—shouldn't they instead have been removed from the scene?"

In the days leading up to the protest, it was widely publicised that the police had acquired "intelligence" about what was being planned by various "anarchist" groups at the demonstration. Former Metropolitan Police chief of anti-terrorism Andy Hayman spoke of "strong intelligence that extremist groups are planning illegal acts of violence at the TUC march and rally on Saturday with the sole aim of disrupting a well-intended peaceful protest". He then added, "It is curious that such a variety of sources seem to be pointing towards an unlawful protest and *yet the police do not appear to be acting on the information, preferring to deal with things on the day*" [emphasis added].

Following the march, Brian Paddick, a former deputy assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, said of the protest in Trafalgar Square, "Again that was flagged up days before that they wanted to occupy Trafalgar Square. There was a lot more I think they [the police] could have done".

How can the supposed police "failures" be explained?

The media speaks routinely of a number of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist groups as the "Black Bloc", mainly responsible for the violence that ensued. But the term merely refers to the black clothing they wear, along with face masks, and does not denote a particularly well-organised or cohesive movement.

These disparate groups, in fact, are an ideal vehicle for the police to either send in infiltrators, or set up themselves and utilise for the purpose of staging provocations. With the police so clearly standing by, the most reasonable conclusion that can be drawn is that a substantial number of those involved in the vandalism and disorder were police officers and

undercover operatives, carrying out or helping organise pre-arranged set-piece disturbances in the most high-profile locations in the capital.

It is well documented that the British intelligence services and police carry out widespread surveillance and infiltration of many political groups, including direct action, anarchist and environmental organisations. In March 2010, it was revealed that a secret police operative spent years spying on the Socialist Party of England and Wales's predecessor organisation, the Militant group, and its youth organisation, Youth Against Racism in Europe, in the mid-1990s.

The recent case of former police officer Mark Kennedy revealed the wide extent of such police operations. Until his cover was blown last year, Kennedy had, under the identity of "Mark Stone", been an undercover agent within the environmental movement since 2003. He operated not just in the UK but throughout Europe, visiting 22 countries in an operation costing £250,000 a year, including his £50,000 salary. According to a *Guardian* investigation, Kennedy "took part in almost every major environmental protest in the UK from 2003, and also infiltrated groups of anti-racists, anarchists and animal rights protesters".

Kennedy was intimately involved in organising, directing campaigns and financing protests, including a planned protest at Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station in Nottingham, which subsequently led to a mass arrest of activists.

The events in London must be seen in this context. Considering the government's immediate moves to hand the police more powers and to curtail democratic rights yet further, one must ask the question, "*Cui bono*"—who benefits?



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