

London Metropolitan Police demand water cannons

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In the build-up to the recent G8 summit in Northern Ireland, London's Metropolitan Police and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) furthered plans to obtain the usage of water cannon.

The two bodies presented a case to Conservative Party home secretary Theresa May for the government to purchase three water cannons, two to be under the control of the Metropolitan Police.

Government spokesmen confirmed that the purchase had already been agreed to in principle. The home secretary stated bluntly that the police will be given whatever "tools they need in order to do their job."

A Home Office source told the *Daily Express* that May is "actually pushing" for water cannon. A Home Office spokesman admitted that they were "currently providing advice to ACPO and the Metropolitan Police as they build the case." And he repeated May's threat: "We will ensure [police] forces have the tools and powers they need to maintain order on our streets."

During the 2011 August riots in London, the home secretary had ruled out the use of water cannon. She said at the time, "We have a different attitude to the culture of policing here. We police by consent." Although "consensual" policing has long been a myth, the deployment of water cannons would represent a further shift to violent state repression of political opposition to its austerity measures.

Publicly, the home secretary and police chiefs have tried to play down the purchase of water cannons, saying that nothing has been decided, negotiations are ongoing and safeguards are still being considered.

Matters are already quite advanced, however. It was recently revealed that 4,000 Met police had been training at Longmoor military base in Hampshire, England, with two water cannons brought over from Northern Ireland.

This was ostensibly in preparation for the G8 meeting, but is clearly directed at the cannons' more widespread use. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has six water cannons, but if the Met obtains them, it will be the first time such repressive apparatus has been deployed on the British mainland.

There was a massive police presence during the protests at the G8 summit. According to reports, in central Belfast, around 100 police Land Rovers were parked in side streets and water cannon units were on standby. Every bank in the city centre was guarded by at least two police officers.

This was part of a huge police operation to repress protests. More than 100 cells have been set aside for protesters at Maghaberry high-security prison. Surveillance drones were brought in and 3,600 extra police officers drafted in from across the British Isles. Sixteen judges were on rota at eight special courts with the potential to sit all day, and extra magistrates were on standby.

The police have chosen the Ziegler Wasserwerfer 9000 as their preferred water cannon. This vehicle, which costs £1.3 million, is the water cannon already in use in Northern Ireland. It is a 29-tonne vehicle with CCTV, searchlights at front and back, and bulletproof windows. It has a crew of two and can carry up to another four police officers. It is commonly used in conjunction with smaller more mobile water cannons. It has a capacity of 9,000 litres of water, and can fire 1,100 litres of water per second. It also has the capacity to fire teargas and "smart water", an invisible dye used to identify people for future arrest, although it is understood that the Home Office's initial licence will not cover that.

The British state has implemented specific counter-terrorism laws in Northern Ireland. Police can stop and

search for munitions and transmitters without “reasonable” grounds for suspicion. Participation in a march the police did not know about is a criminal offence. The PSNI has used plastic bullets on 12 occasions in the past year.

During the 2011 inner city riots in London and other cities, Conservative MP Patrick Mercer, a former army officer, summed up the government’s attitude to the testing of repressive measures on the Irish population and the extension of those measures to all sections of Britain.

“I find it strange,” he told the press, “that we are willing to use these sort of measures against the Irish yet when Englishmen step out of line and behave in this atrocious and appalling way, we are happy to mollycoddle them. If the police want cannon then they should be allowed to use them. I have used water cannon myself and I found them extremely effective.”

Water cannons are often described as an alternative to more violent methods of dealing with protests. Where they are in use, they have caused numerous serious injuries, particularly internal injuries that go undetected at the time. In Stuttgart in 2010, a protester was blinded after being hit directly in the face.

As the Turkish government’s repression of protesters in Taksim Square in Istanbul shows, they are a vital part of an arsenal of repressive weapons. Discussing the deployment of water cannons, ACPO spokesman for firearms and conflict management Chief Constable David Shaw made clear, “It is important to stress that this is just one part of a much broader piece of work encompassing our overall approach to public order policing.”

The demand for water cannons comes as the government is vastly increasing the repressive apparatus of the police. Rubber bullets, already in use in Northern Ireland, were prepared to be used for the first time against students protesting against the hike in tuition fees in 2011.

The Metropolitan Police are currently rolling out a programme to arm 40 officers in every one of London’s 32 boroughs with a lethal Taser gun, bringing the force’s total number of Tasers to 1,590. At present, Tasers are used by police forces in 20 London boroughs.

The Home Office has also been testing a “Discriminating Irritant Projectile,” intended for use

against protesters. This cartridge, effective over a longer range than a Taser, is fired from a gun and releases CS gas when it strikes its target. It is similar to the weapons used by former Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak’s hated police force against opposition in Egypt.

As with May, Conservative London mayor Boris Johnson had initially expressed opposition to water cannons. Where previously Johnson argued against getting into an “arms race with protesters”, he has now embraced water cannons as being a “nuclear deterrent” and “valuable”. He insists that his office will have the final say on use of water cannons against protesters.

Labour Party members of the London Assembly disagree with the police proposals only on tactical grounds. Labour’s police and crime spokeswoman Joanne McCartney said the “evidence for the effectiveness of water cannons is very unclear.” Instead, she argued for a vast increase in police officers who are “riot-trained”, adding, “Water cannons are no replacement for a properly resourced and functioning police service.”

One of the early champions of water cannons was Labour’s defeated mayoral candidate Ken Livingstone, who was endorsed and campaigned for by various pseudo-left parties. In 2011, Livingstone called for water cannons to disperse rioters, saying “the use of water cannon would be very useful.”

After the riots, Jenny Jones, a Green Party London Assembly representative and member of the London Metropolitan Police Authority, argued only that “The use of water cannon was operationally inappropriate in the recent riot situations”. She cautioned, “Water cannon have restricted manoeuvrability, so they would not be very useful against mobile groups in narrow city centre streets or estate lanes.” The Greens also support the use of Tasers “as a last resort.”



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