

Treatment of political activist Trenton Oldfield shows criminalization of protest in UK

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In December, Australian immigrant and political campaigner Trenton Oldfield won his appeal against deportation from the UK, allowing him to stay in the country with his British wife and baby daughter.

Oldfield has worked for over a decade as a professional campaigner for numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs). None of these are threatening to the status quo. Oldfield, for example, was strategic project manager at Cityside Regeneration and coordinator of the Thames Strategy—Kew to Chelsea. In April 2012, he jumped into the Thames during the Oxford and Cambridge boat race—the first time it had been disrupted in 158 years—“in order to draw attention to the mouth dropping, entirely unnecessary and rapidly increasing inequalities that are occurring as a result of austerity.”

Oldfield called the boat race a “symbolic representation of ‘the establishment.’” In the three days before the 2012 race, he said, the establishment had “received royal assent for the fire sale of the NHS [National Health Service], introduced the Data and Communications Bill, and called on people to ‘shop’ their neighbours if they thought they might protest at the forthcoming Olympics.”

He was convicted of causing a public nuisance and sentenced to six months in jail. He served seven weeks before being released and compelled to wear an electronic tracking device while his deportation was being arranged.

Oldfield, who has been resident in the UK for a decade, had applied for a spousal visa. The application was rejected on the grounds that Oldfield’s presence in Britain was “not conducive to the public good.”

In June this year he received correspondence from the

Home Office suggesting he was “undesirable, has unacceptable associations and could be considered a threat to national security” under immigration rules. It was made clear that the intention was to deport him back to Australia.

Oldfield’s arrest was part of a major crackdown against protests ahead of the 2012 London Olympic Games. Conservative Home Secretary Theresa May said the £1 billion security costs were a result of the threat of terrorist attack. The real concern was the development of domestic opposition in response to the government’s austerity measures. This was shown by May’s description of how her department had recently had to combat a new threat from “encampment protests” and other forms of public disorder that could have disrupted the games.

Judge Anne Molyneux accused Oldfield of selfishly robbing the contestants of their months of training and the spectators the pleasure of watching the event. By contrast, former Olympic rower Sir Matthew Pinsent, the assistant umpire, expressed concern that Oldfield might have been struck on the head by the boat’s outrigger and would have been “very lucky to survive.”

Pinsent later said, “The police came to see me that night and took a statement, which took me by surprise: it wasn’t clear to me what they were going to charge the swimmer with. People said, ‘I hope it doesn’t happen at the Olympics,’ but I’d always reply, ‘Look, I want to live in a country where protest is possible. However unwelcome it was, I still value the freedom to do that.’”

In their determination to suppress protest, the British ruling elite sought to use drastic immigration regulation.

Oldfield criticized the idea that “if you’re an immigrant to a country you can’t protest; that you’re somehow different. I thought citizenship and being part of a country or living in a place was that you participated in all those parts of daily life. The separation that immigrants shouldn’t be allowed to protest and if they do we’re going to take away their rights is really quite a worrying precedent.”

Oldfield said he protested because of huge austerity measures that were “worse than in Dickens’s time.” On the symbolism of the target, he said that “Seventy per cent of government pushing through very significant cuts are Oxford or Cambridge graduates. It was a symbolic gesture to these kind of issues.”

Responding to the judgement, Oldfield’s wife, Deepa Naik, said, “London today is the most unequal society in the Western World ... Trenton’s protest was a reaction to an increasingly brutal business, media and political elite. Great Britain has convinced many it is the home of democracy and the gauge of civilisation. Anyone living here today knows Britain is a brutal, deeply divided, class-driven place.”

As soon as the sentence was delivered, the United Kingdom Border Agency and Home Office moved to deport Oldfield back to Australia. Naik said that it was difficult not to see this as “a collective punishment and without any sense of proportionality for the perceived ‘crime.’”

Oldfield, she said, had served his sentence, paid the Crown’s costs, and accepted his criminal record. He did not appeal the verdict and had adhered to all restrictions placed on him, but the government’s punitive measures were “now impacting on our baby.”

There was an outpouring of sympathy for Oldfield during his trial and deportation ordeal. Supporters attending his trial held a banner reading “Stop criminalizing protest.”

The court was also handed a letter with signatures from 265 Cambridge and Oxford staff, students and alumni opposing the deportation. They wrote, “We neither believe that this action constituted an infraction serious enough to warrant such a heavy penalty, nor accept that it establishes that Mr. Oldfield is ‘undesirable, has unacceptable associations and could be considered a threat to national security.’”

“The Boat Race is a game; its disruption should not result in any individual’s deportation. Certainly its

disruption should not be cause to separate an individual from his family, which includes a recently born child.

“We note that the race was completed successfully and no one was harmed by Mr Oldfield’s actions. We do not wish this draconian penalty to be applied in the name of an event representing our institutions.”

In the wake of the “war on terror” and the 2008 economic crash, the ruling elite have grown to fear social unrest. They have accelerated their attack on democratic rights, including the right to peaceful protest.

In 2009, the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers wrote a series of articles about the National Public Order Intelligence Unit (NPOIU) campaign against “domestic extremism.” The NPOIU and its affiliated agencies launched a spying operation to prevent any social and political opposition to government austerity policies and war, by tracking the movements of political groups and individuals involved in political activities.

The next Boat Race, in March 2013, was highly militarized. The *Daily Mail* recorded that “Royal Marines armed with thermal-imaging equipment” were patrolling the river ahead of the race, while commandos would “man up to ten rigid inflatable boats up and down the four-and-a-quarter-mile course” as a “‘visible deterrent’.” Police also monitored social media sites for any signs of planned disruption of the event.



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