

UK police demand water cannon to suppress austerity protests

Robert Stevens
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The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) is calling on the government to introduce the use of water cannon to police forces in the UK. The demand to Home Secretary Theresa May is made in an ACPO briefing paper written by David Shaw, chief constable of the West Mercia police force.

ACPO consists of 213 chief police officers, plus 55 senior police staff members from the 44 forces in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although funded in part by the Home Office and police authorities, ACPO is a private company with no statutory basis and no parliamentary oversight.

The document, “National Water Cannon Assets”, notes, “Water cannon were first used in Northern Ireland in 1969 and at that time were described by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) as ‘mechanised creators of distance between police and protestors’. Development of water cannon took place during the 1980’s and water cannon was officially authorised for use in Northern Ireland in 1999. Water cannon “have never been deployed in England, Scotland or Wales.”

The report states “it is anticipated that the home secretary will be approached in early 2014 in respect of water cannon authorisation”.

The paper explicitly links the requirements of the police to have access to water cannon to combating growing anger and protests against the government’s austerity programme. It states, “There is no intelligence to suggest that there is an increased likelihood of serious disorder within England and Wales. However, it would be fair to assume that the ongoing and potential future austerity measures are likely to lead to continued protest.”

It adds, “In addition, the social and economic factors that are currently being experienced have the potential,

when combined with a significant (and often spontaneous) ‘trigger’ event, to lead to the outbreak of significant disturbances.”

Discussions at the highest levels within the police and government, on the necessity for the state to upgrade their methods of repression, escalated following the August 2011 riots in London and other major town and cities. The riots were sparked by the police killing in Tottenham, London of the unarmed father of four, Mark Duggan.

During the riots Prime Minister David Cameron denounced those involved as “sick” and authorised the use of water cannon at 24-hours-notice. While water cannon were not deployed, Cameron stated, “We will do whatever is necessary. Nothing is off the table.”

The briefing states that had water cannon been available they would have been considered for use during the riots, as it would have provided an “operational advantage”. Three other occasions over the last decade when “it may also have been considered” are cited: A Countryside Alliance protest in 2004, the Gaza demonstrations against the Israeli Embassy in 2008/9 and the student protests of 2010.

It is significant that the briefing specifically points out that water cannon would have been used, in all probability, against *political* protests. In the case of all three protests cited, demonstrators were subjected to police provocation and violent attacks.

During the 20,000-strong Countryside Alliance protest in 2004 in London, an essentially right-wing movement against the passage of the ban on hunting with dogs, police brutally attacked a number of those protesting. More than 50 people, many of them women, were treated for head injuries. An initial 425 complaints were made against the Metropolitan Police.

Following the January 3, 2009 demonstration in

London against Israel's attacks on Gaza, riot police charged protesters at least three times, wielding batons and injuring some demonstrators. The police closed off roads and barriers to surround the crowds on Kensington High Street, near the Israeli embassy.

During the November 10, 2010 protest against tuition fees, a group of students occupied the Conservative Party's Millbank headquarters near the Houses of Parliament. They were forced out by riot police and security officers. Numerous reports attested to police violence, with film footage on social networking sites showing students being hit indiscriminately with batons and riot shields.

In November 2011, just a few months after the riots, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary recommended that police should be able to use water cannon, rubber bullets and live firearms during any future UK riots.

In the build-up to last year's G8 summit in Northern Ireland, the Metropolitan Police and ACPO presented a case for the purchase of three water cannons, two to be under the control of the Metropolitan Police.

London's Conservative Party Mayor Boris Johnson is in favour of water cannon and has launched a "consultation" on the basis that they could be on the capital's streets as early as this summer.

Water cannon are conceived of as "a national asset" by ACPO. The briefing states, "The deployment of water cannon in any given policing area would be an operational decision made by a Chief Officer in the relevant force. Each force should therefore consider how they will communicate and engage with internal and external stakeholders and local communities."

It adds, "Water cannon are capable of travelling at speeds comparable to an HGV and can be mobilised to support any spontaneous or planned policing activity. Deployment time-scales would vary depending on the geographic location of any seats of disorder but it is envisaged that water cannon would be deployed in relation to any prolonged extension of spontaneous disorder."

The move by ACPO is the culmination of concerted efforts to ramp up the already lethal arsenal of weapons available to the police, including Taser guns.

However these tools, described as, "less lethal," are not enough, the report states, "Over the past 20 years, a range of less lethal policing options has been developed

to enable the use of force at close quarters (batons, Taser, incapacitant sprays, etc)." It complains, "The range of less lethal options to exercise control at a distance is limited."

It warns that in the future, to "either protect vulnerable premises or disperse a crowd in a situation of serious public disorder, in the absence of the availability of water cannon tactics it is likely that police commanders would have to authorise alternative tactics (involving significant force) which may include AEPs [Attenuated Energising Projectiles--more commonly known as baton rounds], batons, mounted officers, vehicle tactics, police dogs or even firearms."

The briefing notes that that ACPO "accepts that water cannon are capable of causing serious injury or even death."

While making a few mealy-mouthed criticisms about the use of water cannon, Joanne McCartney, Labour's London assembly police and crime spokesperson, did not directly oppose their introduction, only stating, "The mayor's plans to quickly roll out water cannon on to our streets is deeply worrying. This is being rushed through, and Londoners are being given virtually no chance to express their views. Such a monumental shift in policing needs a proper public debate."



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