

UK: Fascist Tommy Robinson's court victory seized on by far-right

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UK far-right leader Tommy Robinson won his appeal last Wednesday against a 13-month contempt of court jail sentence. He walked free from Onley Prison following a decision that was hailed by the alt-right media as a victory for free speech.

Robinson was jailed on May 25 after he livestreamed a fascistic rant outside a child sex grooming trial at Leeds Crown Court. He verbally attacked defendants of Asian appearance as they entered the court, in view of jurors who had retired to consider their verdict.

Robinson's actions were an assault on the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial. His 13-month sentence included three months for a previous contempt conviction that was handed down after Robinson disrupted a rape trial at Canterbury Crown Court.

His successful appeal does not constitute a victory for free speech. He was released on procedural grounds, with the appellate judges ordering a retrial to determine whether his actions during the Leeds rape trial were in contempt of court.

The Court of Appeal quashed Robinson's appeal against the three-month suspended sentence imposed by Judge Norton at Canterbury Crown Court, but they upheld his appeal against the 13-month cumulative sentence handed down at Leeds Crown Court. The appellate judges found that Judge Marson QC had failed to follow procedural rules, thereby "infringing the appellant's liberty."

Robinson was sentenced within five hours of his arrest on May 25. This meant that his legal counsel was unable to adequately prepare a defence, including presentation of mitigating factors. The judge had also failed to clearly set out the basis for his contempt ruling. While Judge Marson had cited court reporting restrictions then in place, he referred to prejudicial

remarks and actions of Robinson's that fell beyond the reach of the section 4(2) postponement of reporting order.

The appellate judges ruled that Robinson's alleged contempt was serious and that a retrial before a new judge was therefore in the public interest. They also suggested that there were broader grounds for a finding of contempt and warned that Robinson's alleged prejudicial activity at Canterbury and Leeds could result in the imposition of a custodial sentence longer than that already served at Hull and Onley prisons.

None of this prevented the continued portrayal of Robinson, who has called for the deportation of all Muslims from the UK, as a free speech martyr. In an interview with Robinson on the day of his release, *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson falsely claimed that Robinson had been arrested for "speaking out loud on the sidewalk," stating, "I just want our viewers to understand... you went to prison in a supposedly free country for expressing unfashionable opinions in public."

Rebel Media's alt-right founder Ezra Levant declared that Robinson had been "emancipated... in so many ways," describing his treatment as "worse than Guantanamo Bay" and promoting the former English Defence League leader as the spokesman for a broader movement. Robinson agreed he had become "a symbol of something that everyone is galvanising under," adding that "a revolution is brewing."

The response to Robinson's release signals a further rightward lurch by the mainstream media in the direction of normalising the far-right. The British tabloids were predictably sympathetic in their treatment of Robinson, but of greater note was the response of the state broadcaster. The day after Robinson's release, *BBC Radio 4's* flagship *Today* programme featured a

pre-recorded interview with Raheem Kassam, the former Breitbart London editor and chief adviser to UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage.

Kassam was allowed to repeat a litany of falsehoods about Robinson's case and the aims of the far-right in general. These went virtually unchallenged by Martha Kearney, with no right of reply provided to legal experts or opponents of the far-right. The interview prompted an outpouring of protest against the BBC, including from human rights lawyers. These were rejected by the BBC, with a spokesperson claiming that "Martha Kearney's interview robustly challenged Raheem Kassam's opinions and assertions on Tommy Robinson and Islam."

On Wednesday night, Robinson used his *Fox News* appearance to personally thank those such as Tucker Carlson, Republican Congressman Paul Gosar and the neo-con Middle East Forum, which bankrolled his legal defence and helped lead an international campaign for his release. Leading neo-fascists, including Dutch Party for Freedom's Geert Wilders and former Breitbart News chief executive and White House strategist Steve Bannon, are among those who have led the campaign for Robinson's defence.

The alt-right's claims to be defenders of free speech are a grotesque fraud. On July 14, fascist thugs at a "Free Tommy Robinson" protest in London brutally attacked Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union Assistant General Secretary Steve Hedley and his partner Bridget. Hedley suffered a head wound, while his partner was hospitalised with breathing difficulties. The assault followed a "Stand Up to Racism" counter-protest event Hedley had addressed earlier that day.

This past Saturday, the left-wing Bookmarks bookshop in Bloomsbury, central London, was attacked by around a dozen fascists.

The present political climate is Orwellian. Fascists like Robinson are hailed as free speech martyrs, while Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is slandered as an anti-Semite who poses an "existential threat" to British Jews.

WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange, whom the United Nations has described as a victim of "arbitrary detention," faces expulsion from the Ecuadorean embassy in London, amid stepped-up preparations for a US grand jury indictment under the Espionage Act, with charges that carry the death penalty. This in

retaliation for exposing war crimes and other anti-democratic conspiracies by the imperialist powers.

Robinson and other far-right figures have attracted the backing of powerful forces in ruling circles under conditions of the breakdown of the post-war capitalist order, a descent into open trade war and a resurgence of the class struggle. They have successfully exploited Robinson's jailing to bolster support for the far-right, with Robinson reportedly writing, "I'd have done six months just for that recognition."

The far-right can raise its head only due to the complete prostration of the Labour Party and the trade unions, which have refused to mount any struggle in defence of democratic rights or against the ravages of social inequality and war. A powerful movement of the working class fighting for socialism, in defence of immigrants and against war would immediately pull the rug from beneath the far-right. Such a fight would win powerful support from the working class across Europe, in the United States and internationally.



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