

UK: Johnson government demands police repression of George Floyd protests

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The Conservative government and a baying right-wing media are using a few minor incidents of conflict with the police and damage to property to demand a brutal clampdown on the George Floyd protests in the UK.

On Monday morning Prime Minister Boris Johnson tweeted, “People have a right to protest peacefully & while observing social distancing but they have no right to attack the police. These demonstrations have been subverted by thuggery... Those responsible will be held to account.”

Speaking in the House of Commons Monday, Home Secretary Priti Patel declared, “Around 200 protests took place across the country over the weekend, attended by over 100,000 people. As many as 137,500 people have now attended Black Lives Matter protests across the UK.”

She then denounced a “lawless minority of protesters” who “have regrettably turned to violence... The thugs and criminals responsible are already being brought to justice. This is a fluid situation, but as of this morning the total number of arrests stood at 135.”

Patel continued her attack declaring “hooliganism is utterly indefensible” and it is “not for mobs to tear down statues and cause criminal damage in our streets... I want to see the violent minority responsible arrested and brought to justice.”

Tory MPs as well as Labourites denounced “thuggery” and “violent” protesters in the debate. Tory Bob Stewart asked Patel, “I thought the police seemed to be holding back... Will my right honourable friend assure me that the police have every power they need to cope with future riots such as the one that they had to go through on Saturday?”

Johnson gave an interview to the *Voice*, a longstanding journal for the black community. In an accompanying video he commented, “I say, yes of course I hear you, and I understand. And no. I will not support or indulge those who break the law, or attack the police, or desecrate

public monuments.” Johnson said the perpetrators would “face the full force of the law.”

Far from the foaming at the mouth presentation of the government, what distinguished the weekend’s events was their almost universally peaceful character. There were a few scuffles around Downing Street between police and a tiny minority of protesters, with a police officer falling off her horse as it bolted. The horse then ran down Whitehall, ploughing into a demonstrator. Aside from the impact of this poor horsemanship and one officer hit on the head by a bottle, none of the 49 officers cited as injured in the media seem to have suffered any serious harm.

Fireworks were thrown, a Union flag was attempted to be set alight on the Cenotaph, without success, and the nearby statue of Winston Churchill was sprayed with the words “was a racist.”

In Bristol, in an entirely justified protest, the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was torn down. Colston’s statue was dumped by a cheering crowd of 10,000 into Bristol Harbour. The statue has been widely seen as an affront by the city’s residents, and campaign groups have sought its removal for decades to no avail. Colston’s company, the Royal African Company, was responsible for the shipping into slavery, between 1672 and 1689, of an estimated 100,000 West African men, women, and children. All were branded on the chest with the initials RAC. More than 20,000 died during the journey and were thrown overboard.

The large turnout at demonstrations over the last 10 days by multi-racial and overwhelmingly youthful protesters not only reflected anger at the brutal killing at Floyd, but wider social discontent over poverty, social inequality and at the government’s criminal response to a pandemic that has led to more than 60,000 preventable deaths.

This was recognised by the police, who were initially

instructed to maintain a lowkey presence given the social tinderbox that threatens to ignite. Some police officers even “took the knee” in memory of Floyd outside Downing Street. The Metropolitan Police issued a statement through a spokesman: “We know passions are running high and like everyone we were appalled by the images of George Floyd losing his life. Our officers are part of the communities of London and care deeply about justice and equality... Taking the knee is a personal decision for officers,” who were “free to do so at their own discretion.”

Responding to Patel, Andy Marsh, chief constable of Avon and Somerset Constabulary, said of the Bristol events, “Midway through the protest we saw CCTV images in our control room of protesters on top of the Colston statue. Within two minutes that statue had been pulled down.”

Police could easily have broken up the protest and made arrests, he said, but “commanders on the ground made the decision that to intervene and arrest suspects would likely lead to injuries to suspects, injuries to officers, and people who were not involved in damaging property being thrown into a very violent confrontation with the police. Can you imagine scenes of police in Bristol fighting with protesters who were damaging the statue of a man who is reputed to have gathered much of his fortune through the slave trade?”

Johnson, Patel and key figures in ruling circles are now insisting that caution must give way to mass arrests and repression. On Monday, Bristol police superintendent Andy Bennett said, “We know and have identified 17 main offenders in terms of tearing it down and an investigation is underway.”

Johnson and Patel, and their critics in the state apparatus all calculate that the protests against the murder of George Floyd are the harbinger of a far broader eruption of the class struggle. One side is urging caution, for now, for fear of things escalating out of control. Johnson and Patel, like Donald Trump in the US, are insisting that repression and intimidation begins now, before things escalate.

Patel told MPs, “So the police need to know that they have a prime minister, a home secretary and a government who stand with them and will give them the tools, powers and resources they need to keep us safe—and they do. Police funding has had its biggest uplift in a decade, increasing by more than £1 billion, and we are recruiting an additional 20,000 police officers to keep our streets and our country safe. They will have my full support in upholding the rule of law, and in tackling violence,

vandalism and disorderly criminal behaviour.”

The WSWS has repeatedly pointed to the Tories’ “Operation Yellowhammer.” Under its provisions 50,000 regular and reserve troops are readied “in case of civil unrest, to assist at Britain’s airports and to ensure fuel and medical supplies.” They are backed by 10,000 riot police, ready to be deployed in 24 hours, and 1,000 extra police from Britain sent to reinforce the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

While rolled out under the guise of Britain’s exit from the European Union, Yellowhammer’s fundamental purpose is in ensuring that the state apparatus was strengthened for coming confrontations with the working class.

In March this year, the government rolled out large parts of Yellowhammer as it rushed through the Emergency Coronavirus Bill. The Bill, with no public discussion, hands ministers virtually unlimited powers for up to two years, under the pretext of fighting the pandemic. It enabled the government to restrict or prohibit events and gatherings in any place, vehicle, train, vessel or aircraft, any movable structure. The same week 20,000 military personnel were placed on standby—10,000 military personnel regularly assigned to operations among civilians, such as in floods, plus a further 10,000 troops.

Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer wasted no time in denouncing the actions of the Bristol protesters. “It shouldn’t have been done in that way, completely wrong to pull a statue down like that,” he bleated. “That statue should have been brought down properly, with consent, and put, I would say, in a museum.” Starmer’s intervention was a signal to the government that he was fully onboard with their planned clampdown.



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