Johnson government mounts offensive against mass opposition to police violence and racism

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British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his Conservative Party are spearheading a right-wing campaign against anti-racism and police brutality protesters, making a mockery of all calls on the government for progressive reforms.

Johnson announced a government commission on racial equality on Sunday, even as his ministers were preparing a crackdown, in direct alliance with military figures and fascist groups, against protests over the police murder of George Floyd.

Within days, it emerged that Home Secretary Priti Patel is linked with a Facebook group providing a platform for the far-right thugs who attacked Black Lives Matter protesters on Saturday. The group, UK Cenotaph and Military Memorial Volunteers, is run by people who have expressed support for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and anti-Islam websites.

Its page includes comments from members stating, "There is no black in the union jack," claiming that the UK is in the middle of a race war, and calling for mosques to be destroyed. It encouraged a gathering at the Cenotaph last weekend alongside a "Defend our Monuments" provocation organised by fascist supporters of Tommy Robinson and Britain First's Paul Golding.

One of the group's administrators is Philip Smith, a leading youth official and former local election candidate for the Conservative Party. One of its members was Robert Midgley, Johnson's videographer at Downing Street. Smith is the founder of the Friends of the British Overseas Territories charity, endorsed by Patel. The two of them and Midgely were photographed together for a book launch organised by Smith's charity.

The significance of these connections is not solely ideological. After the gathering of fascistic elements promoted by Patel's friends in the UK Cenotaph and Military Memorial Volunteers, the Police Federation of England and Wales and Metropolitan Police Federation called for a ban on all protests for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. Patel, who had earlier denounced those protesting the police murder of George Floyd as "thugs" and "criminals," then joined with Justice Secretary Robert Buckland to announce plans to respond to future protests based upon the measures implemented during the 2011 riots, including 24-hour court sessions and fast-track sentencing.

This is just one small strand of the connections between the Tory government and a fascistic periphery. Confronted with an international wave of protest, the Tories are strengthening their alliances with the most reactionary forces. The racial equality commission, which the government says shows it is "listening" to concerns over racism, is a political provocation of a piece with this orientation.

Johnson has nominated his long-time adviser, Munira Mirza, to run the project. Mirza comes out of the political sewer that begins with the now-defunct Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and which provides a milieu out of which right-wing libertarian ideologues have been recruited to leading positions in the media, academia and various thinktanks.

The RCP declared a "Midnight in the Century" following the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy and restoration of capitalism in 1991 and began a forced march to the libertarian right. Its leading figures nevertheless held together in a clique now gathered around the online magazine *Spiked* and the Institute of Ideas.

Spiked editor Brendan O'Neill is a go-to columnist for Murdoch's *Sun* and other right-wing publications wanting someone to invoke "free speech" in order to denounce "woke thinking," "multi-culturalism," "the left" and other bêtes noires—and above all to back the Tories' Brexit agenda, oppose the COVID-19 lockdown and propagandise for the back-to-work drive.

The founder of the Institute for Ideas, Claire Fox, achieved brief prominence as a Member of the European Parliament for Nigel Farage's Brexit Party. But Mirza is perhaps the right-wing clique's greatest success in becoming a key adviser to the prime minister.

Mirza was a member of the RCP, wrote for its magazine *Living Marxism* and then for its online successor, *Spiked*. She became a development director at the right-wing Policy Exchange think tank. From there, and still writing for *Spiked*, she moved on to work for Johnson during his time as mayor of London, as his culture adviser and deputy mayor for Culture.

In common with the rest of the *Spiked* milieu, Mirza's modus operandi is to leverage the absurdities of identity politics to mount an attack from the right, which excuses racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia. Repeated attacks on "multiculturalism" and references to "victimhood" and "grievance culture" are used as dog-whistles for the far-right, who *Spiked* routinely endorse as the true voice of anti-establishment democracy.

In her writing for *Spiked*, Mirza used a media campaign in 2007 demonising young Muslim teaching assistant Aishah Azmi—for declining to remove her veil while working with male colleagues—to declare that Muslim lobby groups were engaged in a

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“competitive culture of victimhood.” She has written articles headlined, “Stop Pandering to Muslims” and “Diversity is Divisive.”

At the Policy Exchange, Mirza produced a paper titled “Living Apart Together: British Muslims and the Paradox of Multiculturalism,” which again argued that “victimhood” was a major theme in “Muslim identity in the UK.” In 2018, she defended Johnson’s likening women wearing burqas to “bank robbers” and “letterboxes”: “There are many people in this country who are uncomfortable about the burqa. When people argue we should use more sensitive language what they are really saying is let’s not be critical at all, let’s not offend, let’s not criticise this practice because it upsets Muslims.”

Mirza is reported to be considering Trevor Phillips as a member of the government’s racial equalities commission. Phillips was suspended from the Labour Party earlier this year for comments he made about British Muslims, describing them as “a nation within a nation,” saying the centre of gravity of their opinions was “some distance away from the centre of gravity of everybody else’s” and making remarks about how few he observed wearing Remembrance Day poppies.

In an interview with the *Times* in 2004, he called for a rejection of multiculturalism and for the government to “assert a core of Britishness.” He said in 2016 about immigration to the UK, “Rome may not yet be in flames, but I think I can smell the smouldering whilst we hum to the music of liberal self-delusion” and referred to the “dark side of the diverse society.”

On March 9, *Spiked* wrote of Phillips, “The suspension reveals an ideologically purist Labour Party that is now under the control of identitarian leftists … Phillips is also a passionate advocate of free speech—placing him at odds with the thought-policing tendencies of the contemporary British left. He has warned that certain regressive elements are out to silence legitimate concerns about orthodox Islamic doctrines and their social implications.”

Mirza and Phillips’s work will be presided over by a prime minister whose affectation of a bumbling persona is no longer capable of concealing his far-right views. Besides his well-known references to “watermelon smiles” and “piccaninnies,” the *Independent* reported last week that Johnson wrote an article on Africa in 2002 declaring, “The continent may be a blot, but it is not a blot upon our conscience,” adding, “The problem is not that we were once in charge, but that we are not in charge anymore.”

In this context, Labour’s criticisms of the terms of Johnson’s commission and Mirza’s involvement are a political deception, designed to encourage the fiction that any serious review of problems of social inequality and racism can come from the ruling class.

The commission has not been “undermined” by a “vague” remit, nor is it “dead in the water” simply because of Mirza’s appointment, as Shadow Justice Secretary David Lammy and former Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott have claimed.

Lammy insisted, “The only review needed is a review into all the past consultations and reviews as well as their failure to implement over 200 prior recommendations.”

This is a damning self-indictment. Time and again, the Labourites have backed one “review,” “commission” or “judicial inquiry” after another—on major issues as diverse as the Iraq War, the Hillsborough football disaster, the Grenfell Tower inferno—that have ended in whitewashes and official inaction, while demobilising popular political opposition.

In 2017, Lammy himself headed a review into the treatment of, and outcomes for black, Asian, and minority ethnic individuals in the criminal justice system. He answered the call of then Tory prime minister David Cameron, writing of his own review in the *Guardian*, “I thought I was being set up to fail” because “So many of the causes of, and answers to, the problem lie outside the criminal justice system: poverty, lone-parent families, school exclusions, and growing up in the care system. And what more is there left to say about stop and search?”

He went ahead anyway, writing after the publication of its report, “The disproportionate number of BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] young people in the justice system is a social timebomb. It is beyond time to stop talking about this problem and to act.” But it was Lammy who provided yet another fig leaf for the Tories by drawing up the innumerable proposals he now acknowledges have been ignored.

Labour will allow the same to take place under Mirza, under the cover of empty criticisms which do nothing to mobilise popular opposition. On LBC Radio on Monday, Lammy urged Johnson’s Tories, “Get on with the action. Legislate. Move. You’re in government—do something.” This is an appeal directed towards the most right-wing government in post-war British history, which Lammy knows will fall on deaf ears.

The George Floyd protests have raised fundamental questions about the nature of the capitalist state, mobilising millions of people internationally. The race equality commission is a mechanism for Labour and the Tories to run this development aground on a sterile debate between representatives of the ruling class. This takes place as the Johnson government continues its march to the right and prepares the apparatus of the state for a confrontation, not only with the young people protesting racism but with the millions of working people that will be driven into struggle by the deadly impact of the back-to-work drive and the destruction of jobs and essential services dictated by the deepening crisis of the profit system.

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