

UK Tories and Labour denounce Bristol anti-Police Bill protest

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Sunday's clash between protestors and police in Bristol is being used to justify a stepped-up law-and-order agenda.

Around 3,000 mainly young people attended a "Kill the Bill" event on College Green, opposing the government's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill which eviscerates the right to protest. Many carried homemade placards with slogans such as "Freedom to protest is fundamental to democracy", "Say NO to UK police state", "No protest, no democracy", "The day democracy becomes dictatorship?", "Our silence is not your right" and "Kill the Bill".

Several hundred protestors moved on to New Bridewell police station where there were confrontations with police, who deployed riot gear and police dogs and horses as the crowds chanted "Shame on you!" Some fireworks were thrown, windows in the police station were smashed and a police car and van set on fire.

Seven protestors have been arrested—six for violent disorder and one for possession of an offensive weapon. Avon and Somerset police have threatened to track down hundreds more in a "huge investigation", "the biggest appeal for wanted suspects that we've ever done", with "very serious consequences for those involved."

The events were met with a snarling response in the ruling class. Headlines throughout Sunday evening and Sunday night screamed of the Bristol "riot" and police with broken bones. Most officials attacked "professional demonstrators" and "extremists", in the manner of former US President Donald Trump's repeated invocation of "Antifa" as a bogeyman to sanction state repression while solidarising with right-wing extremists.

Home Secretary Priti Patel tweeted, "Unacceptable scenes in Bristol tonight. Thuggery and disorder by a minority will never be tolerated." Chairman of the Avon and Somerset Police Federation, Andy Roebuck, said, "Disgusting scenes in Bristol by a mob of animals who

are injuring police officers, members of the public and damaging property." John Apter, national chairman of the Police Federation of England and Wales, declared, "This is not about protecting the right to protest, it's violent criminality from a hardcore minority who will hijack any situation for their own aims."

Andy Marsh, chief constable of Avon and Somerset Police, told the *Independent*, "I believe the events of yesterday were hijacked by extremists, people who were determined to commit criminal damage, to generate very negative sentiment about policing and to assault our brave officers. There was a hardcore of serious criminals hidden within those 3,000 people—perhaps 400 or 500 people—and we certainly didn't trigger this."

The "hijacked by extremists" claim is made to legitimise state repression and sanction measures targeting the left. Protest and outbursts of social anger are written off as the work of criminal elements who can be legitimately outlawed and suppressed. The same was said of the George Floyd protests last summer. Last night, the *Telegraph* chillingly reported that police are now "hunting for up to 500 violent extremists". Roebuck indicated they would seek to charge the people who set fire to a police riot van with "attempted murder"—the same has recently been done in Spain.

The Labour Party nominally opposes the Police Bill but wholeheartedly endorsed this authoritarian line. Their comments on Bristol were indistinguishable from those of the Conservative government and the police.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer and Shadow Home Secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds described the events as "appalling" and "inexcusable". Starmer said, "I hope that the perpetrators are identified and prosecuted where that's appropriate." Starmer has form, having cheered on the rubber-stamp sentencing of young people after the 2011 London riots.

The filthiest performance was given by Labour Mayor

of Bristol Marvin Rees, who managed to combine McCarthyite anti-communism, patronising moralism and self-centred racialism.

Claiming opposition to the government's Police Bill, he accused the protestors of "lawlessness" which would be "used as evidence and promote the need for the Bill". In words indistinguishable from the ravings of Priti Patel, Rees alleged, "Experience would suggest that there are a group of people running around the country looking for any opportunity to enter into physical conflict with the police or representatives of what they see as the establishment, whether it's the bill, whether it's some other protest, they'll take the opportunity."

Elsewhere, Rees attacked "self-indulgent, self-centred revolutionary tourists looking for a conflict to take advantage of", "people living out their revolutionary fantasies", and "people who go around looking for the latest demo."

He insisted that the events had "nothing to do with Covid and a lockdown" and the hardships suffered by millions, or with years of capitalist austerity, departing for a private fantasy land to claim, "For five years Bristol has built homes, fed its families, prioritised mental health, recruited black and Asian magistrates, organised work experience for our young people who are least likely to be able to get it, we have addressed poverty and introduced a whole new city approach to welcome in and support refugees and asylum seekers."

In February 2017, Bristol's Labour-controlled council voted to slash £104 million from public spending by 2022, including £33 million in the first year, affecting 112 different services. In 2018, the city's youth services were cut by 30 percent. The council has announced that more cuts are "inevitable" to make up an £86 million shortfall built up over the course of the last year.

Since the start of the pandemic, official unemployment in Bristol has more than doubled to 5.1 percent. Another 13 percent of jobs are currently supported by the furlough scheme. Nationally, unemployment has fallen hardest on young people. Students at Bristol University have been engaged in a long battle over the unfair charging of rent during lockdown and have reported a heavy-handed police presence on campus.

Rees's most galling comment used the racist narrative of police violence put forward by Black Lives Matter to paint himself as a victim of the government's authoritarian agenda, and hence also of the protestors' "political illiteracy at large". He told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, "I am from communities who are

disproportionately likely to be on the receiving end of the criminal justice system and receive unfair treatment. What they [protesters of the Police Bill] have done has done nothing to make me, and people like me, safer."

Passing over the self-pity, there is as much chance of a reconciliation between Meghan Markle and the Royal Family as there is of Rees falling foul of the government's anti-protest laws, which are directed against the working class. This is the function of racist politics: to blur class lines by claiming that a well-paid political careerist like Rees and a black worker share common problems and interests.

It is worth comparing Rees's comments on the Bristol protest with his response to the tearing down of a statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol harbour last summer. The latter, said the Labour Mayor, was a "piece of historical poetry". He continued in an interview with the *Guardian*: "The world is full of contradictions and truths that are difficult bedfellows. I have to uphold order at the same time as being honest with people and saying I'm not going to mourn the loss of the statue to the plinth."

It seems when it comes to removing a statue reflecting the legacy of slavery, Rees is as radical as they come. But when it comes to fighting the contemporary turn to dictatorship, he whines that protestors are doing nothing for his personal safety. There could hardly be a better indictment of Labourism in its identity politics garb.



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