

Banksy's Royal Courts of Justice mural destroyed

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12 September 2025

Graffiti artist Banksy this week produced a powerful image of the repressive actions and legislation of the British state. The speed with which officials moved to cover and then remove his mural has confirmed its accuracy.

The mural appeared on Monday morning on a wall of Queen's Building, Carey Street, London. This is in the back part of the Royal Courts of Justice (RCJ) complex, the home of the High Court and the Courts of Appeal. It showed an unarmed protester lying on the ground. A judge, in black gown and white wig, stands over him, beating him with a gavel. The protester's right hand is empty. His left holds a blood-spattered placard.

Banksy issued no statement about the work, simply posting pictures and location to Instagram, his usual method of establishing his authorship.

No statement was necessary. The mural appeared two days after the arrest of more than 850 people in Parliament Square in London, the latest mass arrests against opponents of the genocide in Gaza.

These are among the almost 1,500 arrests made under the Terrorism Act (2000), following the proscription in July by the Starmer government of protest group Palestine Action (PA) as a terrorist organisation. Leading members of PA and the legal rights group Defend Our Juries (DOJ) have been targeted in police raids.

Membership or encouragement of support for a proscribed group carries a maximum sentence of 14 years. Protesting this assault on democratic rights is itself being treated within the remit of the repressive legislation. The 857 arrested Saturday was because they held a placard containing seven words: "I oppose genocide, I support Palestine Action." Under the Terrorism Act, even wearing clothing or carrying items

indicating support of a proscribed group means they could incur a fine of £5,000 or a six-month sentence.

Equating peaceful protest against the genocide in Gaza with terrorism is being used to criminalise opposition to brutal war crimes that are supported by the British ruling class. It is a further step into police state forms of rule that the government has tried to gloss with a veneer of legality. Banksy's sharp image reveals the reality of such legalistic methods of the state.

A DOJ representative said the artwork represented the "dystopian" proscription of Palestine Action and "the brutality unleashed by [then Home Secretary] Yvette Cooper on protesters."

The RCJ moved quickly but unsuccessfully to prevent the mural becoming a focus of attention. It was quickly covered with sheets of plastic and metal barriers, and security guards were posted to the spot. RCJ officials told press that it would be removed.

The Metropolitan Police said a complaint of criminal damage had been made and its inquiries were ongoing, leading to speculation about whether it would see Banksy in court. The prime question, if one were to believe the press, was whether it would finally publicly reveal the anonymous street artist's real identity.

The pursuit of legal routes against Banksy is again confirmation of the repressive state apparatus his mural highlighted. This was reinforced by Blairite Labour peer Harriet Harman, who said more than she perhaps intended. Calling the mural "a protest about the law," she said, "Parliament makes the law, and judges simply interpret the law. I don't think there's any evidence, in terms of the right to protest, that judges have been clamping down on protests *beyond what Parliament intended.*" [emphasis added]

Precisely. The government knows what it is doing

with the judiciary as its willing tool. Banksy's mural exposed that accurately and incisively.

On X/Twitter, the Good Law Project commented, "The court is erasing Banksy's mural just like it's erasing our right to protest... Silencing a work of art about silencing protest? Maybe it was a little too close to home."

HM Courts and Tribunals (HMCT), which has responsibility for the building, ordered the immediate removal of the mural.

The RCJ's front elevation, on the Strand, is a familiar sight from news reports. It is an imposing Victorian Gothic building, designed and built by George Edmund Street in the 1870s and opened in 1882. It is registered as a listed building, meaning it has special protection because of its particular architectural or historic interest. It thus requires special permission for demolition or alteration.

There are categories of listing. Street's building is Grade I listed. When officials called for removal of the mural, they said the RCJ is "valued for its historical significance and must maintain its original character." A compliant media wrote of this in relation to the 143-year-old building.

But Banksy's mural was on a much later building. The Queen's Building was completed in 1968 and is Grade II listed.

In both cases, the listing refers both to the architectural significance and to the building's place in the historical development of British legal systems. On the latter basis, there would be no requirement to remove the mural at all, as it did not alter that significance. If anything, it has reinforced it.

That concern for the building was not the reason for the mural's removal became clear when it was erased on Wednesday. The scrubbing was done in haste and using inappropriate cleaning materials. So far from cleaning and protecting the architecture, the process left a shadow image on the wall.

Banksy has over recent decades become a "collectable" artist, with dealers finding ways of removing murals from buildings and making them highly lucrative sellable commodities. Not this time. There was no way anyone in ruling circles was allowing his latest work to exist, so acute was it in denouncing the moves to police state forms of rule and the accompanying evisceration of democratic rights.

Banksy's work has always shown social conscience and awareness, including opposing the repression of the Palestinians and the filthy treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. He directed a 2009 documentary called *Exit through the Gift Shop* and has been explicit in identifying capitalism as the enemy.

In December 2019, he made a "modified Nativity" manger scene for his Walled Off hotel in the occupied West Bank. "The Scar of David" showed Jesus's manger up against the "Separation Barrier," used to carve up Palestinian land for the Israeli state. The wall has apparently been pierced by a shell, leaving the shape of a star. Hotel manager Wissam Salsaa said Banksy was "trying to be a voice for those that cannot speak."

Two years earlier Banksy organised a street party in the West Bank ahead of the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. An actress dressed as Queen Elizabeth II unveiled a plaque etched into the Separation Barrier. Mimicking her official initials, it read "Er... Sorry."

Banksy wrote, "This conflict has brought so much suffering to people on all sides. It didn't feel appropriate to 'celebrate' the British role in it."

He wrote in 2015 that "Gaza is often described as 'the world's largest open air prison' because no-one is allowed to enter or leave. But that seems a bit unfair to prisons—they don't have their electricity and drinking water cut off randomly almost every day."

The RCJ mural was a sharp exposure of the political repression being applied in Britain by Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government against any opposition to the Gaza genocide. Banksy should be congratulated for it.

A zoomed image of the mural can also be viewed on the Banksy web site here



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