UK: Labour's Policing Problem

Thursday 10 October 2019, by **BHATNAGAR Ansh** (Date first published: 20 August 2019).

Rather than entering an arms race on policing with the Tories and accepting law and order demagoguery, Labour should lead a new conversation about crime in Britain.

In the name of tackling crime, Labour has in recent years been advocating a policy that would put ten thousand additional police officers on our streets. But Boris Johnson has one-upped our policy; promising twenty thousand more police, ten thousand more prison places and a draconian expansion of stop-and-search powers. This was inevitable: by failing to challenge the media's narrative on law and order, we concede the argument to the right, who are happy to outdo any of our policies that are based around a more authoritarian view of the problem.

While our widely popular 2017 manifesto promised thousands of police officers, it also rightly pointed out that black and Asian men are far more likely to be stopped and searched due to institutional racism – and that this must be eliminated. However, no plan or strategy to reach this goal was provided, which is worrying given that the primary part of the policy was to first increase police resources.

A recent investigation by the Guardian has shown that despite making up less than 16% of London's population, black people were the subject of 43% of police searches. The racial disparity has only increased in recent years through the expansion of police power granted by successive Conservative ministers. However, it is not just authoritarian police policy that drives this discrimination — our regressive drug policy also plays a part.

The US-influenced war on drugs in the UK, specifically the criminalisation of cannabis, has allowed the state to crackdown on ethnic minority communities. We have now reached a point where black people are 11.8 times more likely to be convicted of cannabis possession than white people, according to a 2018 LSE report. This is despite black people having lower rates of self-reported cannabis usage, indicating clear racial discrimination taking place in the name of public health and safety.

Ethnic minorities are not the only ones to have borne the brunt of police violence. As the enforcers of the state, the police have been opponents of generations of activists fighting for change. Whether that be the Suffragettes, civil rights protestors, LGBTQ+ marchers at Pride, or striking workers, the message is simple: if you protest and organise against injustice, you can expect resistance, often violent resistance, from those who are meant to protect you.

Some would point out that a whole range of progressive causes have been listed without mentioning that the police work to fight far-right threats. However, a look at the historic clashes between the far-right and their counter-protestors shows that the police have consistently protected fascists. The most notorious example of this is the Battle of Cable Street, when they fought anti-fascist protestors tooth and nail to allow Mosley's fascists to march through London's East End. But the same was true of the Battle of Lewisham in the 1970s — and many fascist demonstrations before and since.

But what is there to fear when the police are acting in service of a socialist Labour government,

implementing our current policing policy that aims to champion good community policing and tackle institutional racism? Won't these problems simply disappear? Unfortunately, the problems are deeper than that. The issues with the police are structural because, by design, they are a *reactive* method of dealing with crime. It isn't the primary job of the police force to address *why* crime occurs. We should aspire to a society with *less* policing, in which its scope and power is vastly diminished.

Rather than enter into an arms race on policing, Labour should be bold in responding to Tory demagogy over policies like stop-and-search. Section 1 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act allows police to stop and search someone if they are suspected to be in possession of drugs or a weapon. Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act allows police to search people without suspicion, if they deem an area to be at risk of violence. Boris Johnson's government plans to weaken the restrictions on the use of Section 60 stop-and-search powers. Labour should go the other way: committing to scrap both Section 1 and Section 60 entirely.

This will be part of a wider programme to rethink the way we address crime, by being proactive and tackling its root causes like poverty, inequality and social exclusion. It should learn from success stories [like Portugal](), where the possession of drugs was recently decriminalised. It would end prison sentences for non-violent drug offences and eliminate the need for drug-based stop-and-search. Treating drug addiction as a public health issue rather than a criminal issue, and funding treatment and rehabilitation services that are accessible to everyone, isn't just the moral thing to do – it's the practical thing to do. It would reduce our prison population as well as free up our NHS resources by reducing the amount of drug-related pathologies.

Labour has been talking about these things to varying degrees, but it often gets lost in the "we need more police" rhetoric. A more consistent message would strengthen our case and allow us to fully tackle the socioeconomic conditions that foster crime. As we cannot reduce our reliance on policing on day one, we must implement more compassionate policing initiatives centred around a positive relationship with the community they are meant to serve: a relationship that would improve if unjust and discriminatory stop-and-search powers were scrapped.

Our current pledge to increase police funding, implemented without a much broader reform agenda, could have severe consequences for minority communities. In recent years we have seen how the police utilise their resources in an information age, with funding increases going towards the acquisition of new technologies to aid in their efforts. A [recent report from Liberty](), a human rights organisation, showed that technology-assisted policing encouraged racial profiling: the algorithms are trained using historic arrest data, which itself is racially biased as people of colour are disproportionately arrested. These programs are used to identify hotspots for the police to further patrol, and with the bias from the data, increase the police presence in disadvantaged inner-city communities. Would a future Labour government be happy with increased funding going to initiatives like that?

Corbynism has reimagined a lot of the Labour Party's policy platform. However, not all parts of our pre-2015 policy platform have been transformed. Our rhetoric on law and order is unbroken since the pre-Corbyn days and cedes far too much ground to right-wing ideas. We must go into the next general election with a reinvigorated policy platform centred around reinvesting in youth services and ending the school-to-prison pipeline: a pipeline that will only be strengthened by Johnson's government.

We must also provide a clear plan for reforming police forces to tackle the issue of institutional racism. Without this, any increase in resources may end up being used to harm black and Asian young people in disadvantaged communities. Our vision for a more compassionate justice system can

only be implemented by defeating Boris Johnson and his Tory Party, but to do that we have to challenge them on the damage they have done to our society and dismantle the foundations of their fake law and order narrative. Labour is the only party that can do that – it's about time we do.

Ansh Bhatnagar

P.S.

Tribune Magazine

https://tribunemag.co.uk/2019/08/labours-policing-problem