

# Britain: Democracy under attack - Time to act

Monday 22 March 2021, by [HANNAH Simon](#) (Date first published: 9 March 2021).

## **Simon Hannah analyses growing police repression in Britain under the cover of the pandemic.**

We are living in dangerous times. There is a steady move towards more authoritarian politics. Governments are chipping away at democratic and political rights.

The dispersal of a socially-distanced protest in Manchester against pay cuts for health workers and the £10,000 on-the-spot fine imposed on nurse Karen Reissmann is a shocking example of the way politics are heading.

Government rules to limit social interaction in response to Covid have been crucial in saving lives. Regulations were brought in when protests against lockdown were organised across the country in 2020.

But a socially distanced protest, held outside, by people wearing masks, organised by nurses furious at an insulting below-inflation pay offer of 1%, is an entirely legitimate act. At the same time, Rangers fans marched through Glasgow with a hastily organised (non-socially-distanced) police escort and no fines or penalties were issued.

*"a socially distanced protest, held outside, by people wearing masks, organised by nurses furious at an insulting below-inflation pay offer of 1%, is an entirely legitimate act."*

The danger is clear: a Tory government using the Covid pandemic to permanently undermine civil, democratic, political, and trade-union rights. This is the same government that has used Brexit as an excuse to question the Human Rights Act. And since 2010, the Tories have placed severe restrictions on trade-union rights, academic freedom, and protest. It has emerged that the police have been maintaining a 'National Domestic Extremism Database' for many years. The reaction to the BLM protests last summer was to condemn them, call them 'illegal', and threaten more laws.

The government plans to tighten the screws even further. Priti Patel has written to the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) asking police to develop procedures to ensure that people only protest in ways that do not interfere with 'the rights of others to go about their daily business'. She wants to turn the current pandemic rules into a permanent feature of British policing.

This follows the recent rushing through Parliament of the 'Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Act', which allows undercover police and spies to break laws, including around rape and torture, if it is in 'the national interest'.

The Tories are also planning a bill to make photo IDs mandatory for participation in elections. This amounts to voter suppression of the kind that has knocked millions of ethnic-minority people off

electoral rolls in the US. Around one in four British electors hold neither a driving licence nor a passport; they are disproportionately poorer and ethnic-minority people.

And it isn't just the Tories. Labour has been adding fuel to the flames, endorsing plans to impose massive fines on people 'desecrating war memorials', while London mayor Sadiq Khan urged police to ensure 'business as usual' by clearing out Extinction Rebellion activists from protest camps in the capital. Labour, led by human rights lawyer Keir Starmer, will not be a natural ally in this struggle - though every member should be protesting the party's complicity in state repression.

Worth mentioning here that the Tories have also hired right-wing Labour renegade John Woodcock to investigate 'extremism' - not just that of the Far Right, but also campaigns like Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter. There is a strong smell of McCarthyism - of witch-hunts against the Left - emanating from the British political class right now.

The moves towards more authoritarian measures must be seen in the global context of Trump, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India, Erdogan in Turkey, Duterte in the Philippines, and the dictatorship of the Chinese Communist Party. As the contradictions of neoliberalism, globalisation, and nationalism deepen, states are increasingly turning to repression, empowering police and security services at the expense of the democratic rights of the majority.

It is time for the Left to wake up. Progressive causes and movements will come under the most severe repression as things develop. We need to focus urgently on the post-lockdown situation and ways to defend political and democratic rights. And this has to be connected with the fight against institutional racism, the anti-union laws, and the persecution of migrants.

*"It is time for the Left to wake up. Progressive causes and movements will come under the most severe repression as things develop."*

State authoritarianism, at home and abroad, is accelerating as the crisis of the world system deepens. Our rulers are preparing to crush dissent and opposition. We need to respond with a mass movement for democracy - to defend existing rights, but also to push back against police rule, management dictatorship, and corporate power, and to fight for real democratic control over all aspects of our lives.

The stakes are high, the time short, the need urgent. Get in touch through the A\*C.R website if you would be interested in getting involved in a campaign for democracy.

**Simon Hannah**

---

---

**P.S.**

- Anti\*Capitalist Resistance (A\*C.R). 9 March 2021:

- <https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/democracy-under-attack-time-to-act>

- Simon Hannah is a socialist, a union activist, and the author of A Party with Socialists in it: a history of the Labour Left, Can't Pay, Won't Pay: the fight to stop the poll tax, and System Crash: an activist guide to making revolution.