



Analysis

UK: Arrests, raids and wedding parades

Chris Jones

The Coalition government's commitment to restore freedom and rights in the face of increasing state power is thrown into question by the heavy-handed response to small protests on the day of the royal wedding

We will be strong in defence of freedom. The Government believes that the British state has become too authoritarian, and that over the past decade it has abused and eroded fundamental human freedoms and historic civil liberties. We need to restore the rights of individuals in the face of encroaching state power, in keeping with Britain's tradition of freedom and fairness.[1]

This was the statement made in May 2010 by the UK's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in their *Programme for Government*. It was the quotation that opened the section on civil liberties, and it was followed by a number of policies the coalition intended to enact. Included amongst these was a claim that 'rights to non-violent protest' would be restored. Very little has been done about this in the time that the coalition has been in power, a theme repeated with many of the other civil liberties commitments made by the coalition. [2] The policing of the recent royal wedding demonstrated the right to non-violent protest is far from protected. More alarmingly, arrests of individuals unconnected to anti-monarchist protests have been justified in the name of 'security.'

The proposal

It was made clear by the police and the government from the moment the wedding was announced that security would be paramount. As with all other major public events, the risk of terrorism was cited as requiring a stringent security operation, which led

to over 5,000 police officers being deployed in London on the day of the wedding. They were joined by "snipers on rooftops, undercover officers among the crowds and armed police trained to deal with a Mumbai-style terror atrocity in central London." The total cost of this was estimated at £20 million. [3] Stringent security measures of this sort are familiar to many high-profile events, such as visits from foreign dignitaries or major sporting events; next year's London Olympics seems likely to be a security paradise. What was different was the brazen attitude of the police regarding the tactics they would be using.

As the wedding drew closer, the Metropolitan Police openly admitted that they would likely be using pre-emptive arrests - 'proactive raids', [4] in official terminology - to deal with those perceived as a threat. Black-clad anarchists, Islamic extremists and dissident Irish republicans mingled freely in stories documenting the litany of threats to the wedding. The spectre of anarchism was a consistent theme of pre-wedding reporting. [5] Particularly beneficial for the media were the connections they could make between property damage and rioting during protests against public spending cuts in London on 26 March and the potential security risk to the wedding. Although a "Mumbai-style terror attack" was supposedly one of the primary concerns of the police, those subject to pre-emptive arrest seemed to be limited to anarchists and those of a similar radical bent.

The dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ protestors that has dominated discussions of demonstrations in the last few months was clear during the policing of the royal wedding. Those who had contacted local authorities and police forces to organise ‘republican street parties’ were left well alone, with intimidation and arrests reserved for the unauthorised “bad protestors.” Many of these individuals, however, were not planning to protest against the wedding at all - they simply happen to be politically engaged.

Something blue

The days before the wedding saw widespread use of pre-emptive arrests against potential protestors. A number of operations targeted squats in London. Officers from the Metropolitan Police were dispatched on 28 April, the day before the wedding, to three different locations. At an address in Camberwell 19 people were arrested - for the offence of “abstracting electricity.” In Hackney, one person was arrested “in connection with the disorder following the TUC march” on 26 March. Perhaps the most absurd of the three raids took place at a squatted market garden site near Heathrow airport - essentially an eco-village - where the residents were woken at 8am by police officers (clad in full riot gear), who subsequently found no evidence of any criminality and were forced to leave empty-handed. Neither were such raids limited to the capital city. Officers from the Metropolitan and Sussex police forces acted in concert to raid a squat in Brighton, arresting seven people. [6] A press release issued by the Met after these raids and arrests stated that they were “part of ongoing proactive work to tackle suspected criminality” and were “not specifically related to the Royal Wedding but have been brought forward ahead of the event.” [7] Certainly, none of the warrants used in the raids related to the wedding itself. However, the fact that it was deemed necessary to conduct these operations before the wedding would seem to indicate that they were intended to prevent ‘suspect’ individuals taking part in any protests. The bail conditions given to those arrested - that they were not to enter Westminster, where the wedding took place [8] - only serve to confirm this theory.

Similar conditions were attached to the bail of a number of other people issued with charges in the same week. On 27 April, 12 people were issued with charges related to student protests during December 2010. [9] On 28 April five individuals were charged and provided bail only on the condition that they did not enter Westminster. [10] In total some 90 people received such orders.

Some arrests were more direct, with the police making use of charges related to potential disruption of the wedding. Three organisers of a protest planned to take place on the day of the wedding were arrested “on suspicion of conspiracy to cause public nuisance and breach of the peace.” [11] In Cambridge one individual was arrested on the same charges, leading to a demonstration outside the police station in which he was held. [12] In a video of the arrest, it is pointed out to the two officers present that having spoken with the police the day before, the arrestee was told there was no intention of detaining him. [13] Inconsistent seems to be a theme of the policing of ‘radicals’ suspected of potential involvement in protests at the wedding.

The big day

None of the protests planned for the wedding day were due to take place anywhere near the wedding itself, and the majority of them were intended to be light-hearted attempts to make a point and have fun at the same time. One protest that perhaps unsurprisingly caught the eye of the police was billed as the Royal Zombie Wedding Orgy, with “rumpy pumpy and guillotines.” [14] Despite the fact that three organisers had been arrested the day before, a number of others came to the proposed location on the day. The dozen or so people who gathered in Soho Square were met by an equal number of police officers. With no sense of irony, 12 police officers forcefully arrested someone who was singing a song with the lyrics “we all live in a fascist regime,” and proceeded to do the same to a number of other people. [15]

A personal account of an arrest posted on the internet makes for disturbing reading. Standing outside Charing Cross train station, a group of people planning to attend a republican-themed street party were questioned by officers from both the British Transport Police and the Metropolitan Police. The group were then handcuffed and taken to a police station several miles from central London. Following this:

Four of us were led off the coach to be processed in the police station. We were searched again and had our personals confiscated and details taken. We were not at any point charged with any offence, nor was any indication given that we would be charged with any offence. A senior officer, giving some background to one of the desk officers who were doing the paperwork, explained that we were “anti-royalists” who had been planning to “commit a protest” near the wedding. [16]

Interestingly, the article also claims that a police

officer stated that the Metropolitan police “had been ‘rounding people up’ in advance of the royal wedding.”

Five other people were arrested, again on the charge of “suspicion of planning a breach of the peace”, seemingly due to the fact that they were dressed up as zombies. One arrestee stated that “it is nice to dress up as zombies.” [17]

“A threat to democracy”

The day after the arrests the Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Lynne Owens felt free to state that “[w]hen we undertook any action, it was on the basis of intelligence.”[18] If the intention of the policing was to ensure that individuals committing or planning to commit criminal acts were apprehended, then it may be suggested that in this instance, ‘intelligence-led policing’ seems to be something of a contradiction.

However, the balance of evidence seems to suggest that the policing operation was based on a political need to ensure that the event was as tightly-controlled as possible, with no room for ‘unauthorised’ dissent. The role of police intelligence was not restricted to dealing with individuals planning anything that should be considered an arrestable offence in a society apparently based on “freedom and fairness.” Rather, intelligence on individuals and places with an active interest in politics was used to suppress ‘dissent’ before it even happened - and it is extremely doubtful that many of those arrested were even planning any involvement with anti-monarchist protests. The police publicly stated that the wedding day was to be “a day of celebration, joy and pageantry,” and that they would “not tolerate the event being disrupted.” [19]

It is likely that the arrests were used to try to obtain more information on the political activities of individuals and groups in which they are involved. During protests on 26 March in London, some two hundred people were arrested. Following this, Assistant Commissioner Lynne Owens stated before a parliamentary committee that making so many arrests provided “some fantastic intelligence opportunities.” [20]

In the case of the royal wedding, the policing model most frequently associated with international political and economic summits was applied to an event for which there was to be no significant physical manifestation of public opposition. Bob Broadhurst, Metropolitan Police Commander, stated the day before the wedding that “the threat to the

wedding is a threat to principals [i.e. VIPs], it is a threat to democracy.” [21] However, it seems clear that the policing operation undertaken to protect “democracy” involved the abuse of individual rights and democratic principles. Rather than enforcing the law, the police took on the role of ensuring the veneer of celebration remained in place. These forms of dissent that were tolerated were agreed in advance with the police and local government, and, it is worth noting, made heavy use of union jacks and other patriotic imagery. Anyone stepping beyond these bounds was deemed unacceptable and treated to a day in a cell.

It has been noted by Naomi Klein with regard to police violence that:

If protestors are publicly treated like criminals enough, they start to look like criminals, and we begin, albeit unconsciously, to equate activism with sinister wrongdoing, even terrorism. [22]

The same statement could easily apply to tactics that involve the pre-emptive and speculative arrest of people who have been consistently associated in the press with terrorists. With few exceptions, media coverage of the arrests surrounding the wedding was uncritical of the tactic used, and accepting of the justifications supplied.

Also indicative of the criminalisation of protest groups is the approach taken by the British policing establishment. One of many possible examples is the work of the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit (NETCU), which justifies the surveillance and infiltration of protest groups on the grounds that they may be ‘domestic extremists’, a term for which there is no legal definition. [23] Although NETCU is soon to be disbanded, an analysis of the unit concluded that “it is unlikely that [their] role... will disappear entirely.” [24] It may well be the case that such work is absorbed into the proposed National Crime Agency.

Happy anniversary

Following the 2009 protests against the G20 in London, police tactics came in for heavy scrutiny and criticism. Parliamentary enquiries were undertaken, protestors demanded justice, reforms were promised, and a police officer is now due to stand trial on a charge of manslaughter. Two years on, and in the wake of illegitimate, abusive and anti-democratic policing tactics applied to ensure “celebration, joy and pageantry,” the response from the public and the press has been far more muted. Such tactics may be less visible and visceral than outright police violence, but they are no less insidious to the rights of individuals.

As for the coalition government's commitment to civil liberties, it too should surely be called into question by such policing operations. It has been commented that the Home Secretary's own commitment to civil liberties is only "skin deep." [25] After one year in office, this seems increasingly to be the case. Indeed, letters from Theresa May to the high-ranking police responsible for the policing of the wedding make no mention of the pre-emptive

and specious arrests that took place, nor the closing down of minor, peaceful, protests. Rather, she chose to comment on the fact that "the policing plan worked well, and is a testament to the professionalism and experience of the Metropolitan Police." [26] If this statement a yardstick by which to judge the rest of the government then "the face of encroaching state power" still looms large.

Footnotes

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