200 years after Peterloo, do we face a new wave of repression?

written by Ian Allinson | August 11, 2019

The left and labour movement has always been the subject of state repression. The failure of the Peterloo massacre to silence working class dissent led to the foundation of the modern police force, intended to deliver non-lethal violence against unrest (Farrell, 1992). While perhaps their murder rate is lower than the yeomanry or the parachute regiment, the police have not kept their violence below lethal levels, as witnessed by hundreds of black people from Joy Gardner to Jean Charles de Menezes and protesters from Blair Peach to Ian Tomlinson. Mass police violence was essential to Thatcher's victories over miners, print workers and more. The police have been involved in illegal blacklisting of trade unionists and the left, and undercover cops have spied on victims of police violence and anyone who challenged the establishment. It is a result of the weakness of working class resistance in recent years that so many people think the police are there to deal with crime against ordinary people – a task which is a low priority and for which they are almost useless. Labour's pandering to this foolishness with demands for extra police have played into the hands of Boris Johnson, who has now pledged to increase numbers by 20,000. That will be more police to prevent working class people securing what we need. Johnson is so keen on repression that he wasted over £300,000 on unusable water cannon when London Mayor. He will be delighted to have more cops at his disposal as the struggle unfolds over whether the social collapse from climate breakdown means changes to tackle it, or repression by the rich to protect themselves from its consequences and from the majority.

In July, right wing think-tank the Policy Exchange published a report titled Extremism Rebellion, urging new legislation to counter mass civil disobedience and a more robust police and court crack down on Extinction Rebellion (XR), not satisfied with 1200 arrests. August saw the publication of a report commissioned by the UK Commission for Countering Extremism which sought to portray the far left as extremist and a potential terrorist threat, and calling for more monitoring. When the government has been forced into a review of its racist and counterproductive Prevent strategy, this looks suspiciously like the right trying to ensure it is widened rather than dropped.

Anti-terror legislation has been used to persecute Muslims and there has been no shortage of academics prepared to concoct half-baked theories to justify government policies. The failure of the

labour movement to provide enough solidarity with Muslims to resist these policies is now coming home to roost as the state security ideologues turn their attention to the left. Having abused the language of "safeguarding" to justify Islamophobia, they now want to use counter terrorism and anti-extremism against left opinions held by millions of people. We should not underestimate how exposed we are. The Terrorism Act 2010 introduced a definition of terrorism so wide that Gandhi, let alone Mandela, would today be branded a terrorist, and anyone in Britain who supported them would be criminalised.

So far, the application of the repressive legislation has affected few white British people. But it has now been normalised to the point where right wingers want to go further. So what are the arguments being made for a new wave of repression?

Walton and Wilson, who wrote the attack on XR, both come from an anti-terrorism background. They label XR an "extremist organisation" because "those who accept planned mass law-breaking in a liberal democracy to further a political cause, are effectively condoning the breakdown of the rule of law". So the word "extremist", which has been loaded with violent connotations from anti-terrorism, is now applied to mass, peaceful, direct action. They call for prosecutions to deter others from illegal protests, and demand that

> "The Commission for Countering Extremism should ensure that far left, anarchist and environmentalist extremism are sufficiently recognised and challenged within a wider national strategy on extremism".

Having labelled XR's objectives as extreme, they then argue that it is "not inconceivable that some on the fringes of the movement might at some point break with organisational discipline and engage in violence". The report works itself into a frenzy about the connections between environmentalism and anti-capitalism. They worry that XR leaders are unlikely to "settle for any accommodation that proposed to address environmental damage while keeping the present economic and political system in place" (as if such a solution is plausible). Their view of "extremism" isn't about protecting the population from violence, but about protecting the system from opposition. When it comes to justifying Islamophobia we are used to hearing people disapprove of what is said, but expressing the willingness to defend to the death the right to say it. It appears this applies to racist ideas, but not to environmentalism or socialism. The authors work themselves up into a lather about the Labour leadership's positive response to XR. Ironically, the hostile report's detailed analysis of XR funding should lay to rest many of the scare stories which circulate online. Walton and Wilson call for firmer policing, harsher prosecutions and sentencing, and for the use of incitement and conspiracy charges (infamously used to frame the Shrewsbury 24 and murder Des Warren).

The report into the far left is even more extraordinary. It uses YouGov polling on the general population, just 3% of which self-defined as "very left-wing". Most of these were *Guardian* or *Observer* readers, NRS social grade ABC1 and voted Remain, and only 16% were union members. Allington, McAndrew and Hirsh, by a confused reading of *Socialist Worker*, *Weekly Worker* and *Counterfire*, come up with fifteen statements which they believe represent the views of the "sectarian" (by which they mean sect-like) far left, which they also characterise as revolutionary workerist. They pick five of these to measure people's alignment with the ideas of far-left groups:

- Capitalism is essentially bad and must be destroyed
- Industry should produce for need and not for profit
- This country needs revolutionary change
- The wealthy make life worse for the rest of us

- I would like to see workers rise up against their bosses

They are horrified to discover that only 41% of the whole population disagreed with all these, but instead of concluding that these are widely held views, they adopt the conspiracy theory that the population is "open to the ideology which the sectarian far left disseminates", while treating as conspiracy theories the concept of "the 1%" and the idea that the media reflects the interests of the rich. The widespread support for these views doesn't stop the authors arguing that this ideology "may from a certain point of view be considered extremist in and of itself". The "certain point of view" would appear to be that of 21st century McCarthyites. Similarly, they believe attempts by the far left to gain influence by participation in campaigns and unions "may cause certain forms of social harm in their own right: for example, by interfering in the normal functioning of institutions created for another purpose". Allington, McAndrew and Hirsh take it upon themselves to decide what the purpose of institutions of the labour movement and left is, rather than purposes being contested by those who take part. For the authors, democracy is a bit like a Vietnamese village was to the US military – to protect it they have to destroy it.

The report also bases its understanding of the far left on an odd understanding of imperialism (which it smears with antisemitism along the way). People were asked to choose the three of the US, UK, Israel, Russia, China, North Korea and Iran which they see as the greatest threats to world peace. The authors assume that people's answers to this question will be based on ideological views rather than anything as irrelevant as say, involvement in wars or breaking treaties. Apparently, most of the far left only sees the first three as great capitalist powers. This is an odd reading of *Socialist Worker* and *Counterfire*, upon which the majority of their view of the far left was allegedly based. Just as with Muslims, the test is whether you support the UK and its allies, and failing to do so is a sign of extremism.

Having concocted these half-cocked measures of alignment with the sectarian far-left, Allington, McAndrew and Hirsh proceed to look for correlations with a modified version of the SyFoR "sympathy for radicalism" scale (Bhui, Warfa and Jones, 2014). People were asked to rate six statements about violence on a seven-point scale, showing the extent to which they sympathise or condemn them when carried out in this country. Four were about terrorism or using bombs, but two were "violence as part of political protests" and "street violence against anti-democratic groups". The questions gave no other context, so will have been interpreted in radically different ways by different people. Some may have considered the questions in the context of planned violence in otherwise peaceful situations. Others may have been thinking about situations when under attack from the police or fascist gangs. Others again could be imagining a future where the rich are hoarding scarce food after climate breakdown causes crop failures. It is far more likely that working-class people, migrants from conflict zones, ethnic minorities and others with experience of violence from the state or the far right would express sympathy in response to these questions – this is no indication whatsoever that they are planning terrorist attacks. Yet this is precisely how the authors interpret the answers. To make matters worse, the threshold they use for their analysis is sympathy for *one or more* of the statements, so those with slight sympathy for defensive violence against fascist gangs are lumped in with those committing terrorist acts. They assume, without evidence, that left wingers who exceed this modified SyFoR threshold are more likely to behave violently.

It is through this series of ideologically motivated leaps of logic and analysis that Allington, McAndrew and Hirsh manage to acknowledge that the far left in Britain has "no history of using terrorist tactics", find no evidence that is likely to change, and yet conclude that "it would be prudent to monitor all developments carefully" because the findings "give no reason to assume that left-wing ideas would be incapable of" encouraging terrorist violence. Predictably, they give no consideration to the strong political objections that most of the British far left have to terrorism.

The reports are a threadbare attempt to justify surveillance and repression against the left by linking it to terrorism. Naturally, they take for granted highly subjective definitions of terrorism and violence. Support for the Iraq war crime, imposing benefit sanctions on terminally ill people, or deporting people to countries they left decades ago don't count as extremism. British military adventures overseas don't count as violence. A foreign policy based on threatening nuclear annihilation doesn't count as terrorism. At most, the authors deserve to graduate from the University of No Shit Sherlock, having shown that people who are satisfied with the status quo are less likely to sympathise with violence not carried out by the establishment.

The left, however, shouldn't be complacent because these reports are so ludicrous. They are intended to provide an intellectual gloss to cover for an extension of the application of anti-terror surveillance and repression against the left. We know there are storms coming as a result of climate chaos, an expected recession, years of austerity, and Brexit – and so do the Tories. Johnson has announced more prison places and police powers. The Tories are preparing – so must we. That must include robust opposition to new state powers and the wider application of old ones. We can't rely on the state to stop the rise of the far right. And we can't afford to neglect solidarity with the Muslims and migrants upon whom repression is tested out and normalised.

For information about Peterloo and events marking the bicentenary, see peterloo1819.co.uk. The Peterloo March For Democracy will converge on a rally in the city centre from ten assembly points on Sunday 18 August.

Bhui, K., Warfa, N. and Jones, E., 2014. Is Violent Radicalisation Associated with Poverty, Migration, Poor Self-Reported Health and Common Mental Disorders? *PLoS ONE*, 9(3).

Farrell, A., 1992. *Crime, class and corruption: the politics of the police*. Bookmarks.

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