

As [Nina Power](#) notes in the Guardian this morning:

In [Sir Paul Stephenson's resignation](#) as Metropolitan police commissioner on Sunday night, one of the things he claimed he was most proud of the Met for was "the professional and restrained approach to unexpected levels of violence in recent student demonstrations".

Now the fact is that the recent student demonstrations were remarkably peaceful. It was a police policy of kettling - almost certainly illegally - that intimidated people into a position that fear provoked their response. Driving police horses into people doesn't help either.

No, I'm not excusing vandalism in saying that: and of course there was some. There was also some stupidity - nothing excuses throwing a fire extinguisher off a roof or attacking cars, whoever might be in them (although the scale of offence in those two cases is remarkably different). But that's not what Stephenson was talking about. He was talking about his force's ability to break up demonstrations.

Remember, the Met's good at this. As [John O'Connor notes](#) this morning in the Guardian:

The resignations of Sir Paul Stephenson and John Yates are the result of close associations between the police and News International that go right back to the start of printing at Wapping.

An assistant commissioner was in charge of police operations to ensure that the News International product got out on to the streets. There is no doubt that Rupert Murdoch and his senior executives were extremely grateful for the assistance given by the police, and many police officers have enjoyed an unhealthy, close relationship with News International since those days.

I am sure that is true. Now we are paying the price for it.

And we see that complete bias, misrepresentation and systematic abuse of justice in the case of the people arrested at Fortnum & Masons last March. As the

Independent notes today:

Prosecutors have dropped more than 100 cases against activists who staged a sit-in at Fortnum & Mason four months ago in protest over the department store's alleged tax evasion.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has thrown out all 109 charges of aggravated trespass under review, leaving just 30 of the original 146 UK Uncut protesters arrested for occupying the central London store still facing court. The CPS said yesterday it was not in the public interest to pursue the case against the majority of the campaigners.

They continue:

She added that the prosecutions were not in the public interest because protesters had not been involved in similar offences before, had played only a "minor role in the offending behaviour" and the court would be likely only to impose a "nominal penalty" on them.

Mike Schwarz, a solicitor for Bindmans, which represents about 110 of the protesters, said he thought it was "irrational" to drop cases against so many but to continue to prosecute 30 others, who were selected because they had banners, leaflets, or had been involved in similar protests previously.

I'll return to that in a moment. First let me note what the Guardian reported yesterday, [which is](#):

The Guardian can now reveal that the police admit deception in the lead-up to the mass arrest. Clark has confirmed she was told by her fellow commanding officers that everyone inside the building would be arrested. However, 10 minutes later at 5.50pm, Clark has admitted, she gave assurances to demonstrators that they would be allowed to leave unhindered.

On the video, which timestamps confirm was shot after 5.50pm, Clark can be heard telling a member of the crowd that the police were "getting ready to let you go". In response to a question about whether there was a "kettle" outside, she replies: "No, we are getting ready to let you go."

This is police corruption at play. Let's not pretend otherwise.

And what of those who remain charged? They've been selected for having "banners, leaflets, or ha[ving] been involved in similar protests previously". So what this comes down to is that these people are being charged for having exercised their right to protest. For, to put it at no more basic a level, of exercising their right to free speech.

A corrupt state - and as is readily apparent we have been living in a corrupt state - requires a corrupt police force to enforce its oppression of those who oppose it. This act

- of prosecuting those who have protested - is that action of a corrupt police force seeking to oppress the right of free speech when undertaken by those who were not in any way violent in the course of their exercise of that right. All they did was go into a shop - something the shop did after all invite them to do by declaring itself open to all comers on its door.

No, I'm not sorry to see Sir Paul Stephenson go. This was a man who could not tell right from wrong - read John O'Connor's whole article in the Guardian to see that - but who was willing to use his own distorted view of the entitlement of an elite of which he was apart to oppress those challenging it.

I've previously declared my support for the Fortnum & Mason 145 on the basis that they committed no acts of violence. I'm happy to do so again. More than that, I make very clear, I think it's time to drop all charges and look at charges against Chief Inspector Clark for perverting the course of justice, which she clearly did.

The right to protest is fundamental to democracy. The Met's former chief used his resignation statement to reiterate his pride in oppressing it. can there be any clearer indication of the Cowardly State we're in?