

Apologies are not enough: the right to protest about ta...

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The police [apologised to six members of UK Uncut yesterday](#) for the use of excessive and inappropriate force during the course of a peaceful demonstration outside Boots in London in January 2011.

I am obviously pleased that an apology has been offered and that compensation will be paid to those injured but that is not the point of commenting. There are three reasons for doing that.

The first is to say that this should not have happened in the first place. The right to protest is a fundamental human right. As I have always made clear, I will never condone violence but some peaceful disruption is an inherent part of protest; without it there would be no chance of it being noticed. This right has already been seriously curtailed in the UK and on this occasion it was abused. The police need to be trained to ensure they uphold the right to demonstrate. They do not appear to do so at present. That is a serious failing.

Second, protest about tax has a particular and proud history in the creation of freedoms we should all cherish including the development of parliamentary democracy, the universal franchise and, of course, the creation of many sovereign states in the form that we know them. I am not saying that this means tax protest has a special status. I am saying that an awareness that protest on this issue has usually reflected very real underlying concerns that are the precursor of major shifts in society is important.

Third, the significance of the relatively rare protests that occur on tax (the last before UK Uncut's action were the poll tax protests, and they had major political ramifications) means that they usually touch raw political nerves in all sides. It is the duty of the police on these occasions to be impartial whilst upholding the law. This requires sensitivity and so long as the protest is peaceful that also requires considerable restraint. This did not happen on this occasion. We need a depoliticised police force and politicians of all parties would be wise to work towards that objective. We do not have it at present, in my opinion. That is a threat to the necessary balance on which democracy depends. This is an issue to be addressed in defence of democracy

as well as law and order.

Why is all this important? Because the alternatives to non-violent protest as a way of drawing attention to an issue if concern are so much worse in very many ways. That's why I think this right so fundamental.