

The politics of protest and the fear of the far right

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Britain now has a very strange relationship with protest. Some protests are treated as if they were an existential threat to the state. Others, which are often smaller, angrier, and far more violent, are seemingly indulged as if they had a democratic legitimacy that their behaviour does not deserve.

Why is this?

First, consider the scale. When tens of thousands march in London for equality, climate action, or peace, the political establishment barely notices. Recent protests about Gaza are a clear indication of this. At most, the media dismisses these as “fringe events.” Yet when a few hundred people gather outside an asylum hotel, waving flags and shouting abuse at families who have already been stripped of their rights and dignity, the government and opposition alike rush to recognise their “concerns.” The double standard could not be clearer.

Second, look at the response. Councils and ministers line up to argue that asylum centres should close because their existence supposedly provokes unrest. The logic is perverse. They are blaming the vulnerable, rather than those who are attacking them. Instead of condemning racist thuggery, politicians find ways to accommodate it, hoping that if they grant its demands, the mob will disperse. This is appeasement, pure and simple, and there is no evidence it has ever worked.

Third, there is the wider political dynamic. Both government and opposition are now very obviously gripped by fear of the far right. The Tories dress this fear up as “stopping the boats.” Labour echoes the same sentiment in lines about detention and deportation, desperate not to lose ground to Reform. In doing so, both parties normalise the language and demands of those who would turn fear and violence into a political programme.

The consequences are dangerous.

Democracy is undermined when peaceful protest is ignored while violent intimidation is

rewarded.

The far right is emboldened because it can see that aggression works. Every time a council or minister capitulates, the lesson is reinforced.

Social division is deepened, because refugees are scapegoated for the failures of government rather than recognised as people seeking safety and dignity.

Trust in democratic institutions withers, because the message is clear: power listens only to those who threaten disruption, not those who demand justice.

So what is to be done?

We have to insist that the right to protest applies equally, regardless of cause. That means non-violent protest must be defended and respected, not criminalised. It also means that violence and intimidation can never be rewarded with policy concessions. This is fundamental. Confidence in government and our democracy will evaporate unless this happens.

We also have to call out the political cowardice of so many of our supposed leaders for what it is. If our political parties are too afraid to confront the far right, then they are abandoning their responsibility to protect this country and our democracy, which is one of their most fundamental and primary duties. Appeasement never works. It simply invites escalation.

And we need to remember something deeper. Protests are always about more than the numbers who turn up. As political economy makes clear, they are about the signal they send to power. If the state continues to listen to mobs while dismissing movements for justice, then the responsibility falls back on us, in whatever way we can, to keep raising our voices until they cannot be ignored. That way, the balance of power is maintained.

The choice is pretty stark. We either accept a politics that is now shaped by intimidation and fear, or we commit to a politics shaped by justice and solidarity. I would suggest that there is only one democratic choice, and that our politicians are enabling the wrong one.

In that case, what can we do? I suggest the following. We can:

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Refuse the false narrative that blames refugees for the violence directed against them.

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Support organisations working to defend the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.

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Write to MPs and councillors demanding that racist violence be condemned, not rewarded.

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Join and support peaceful protests that show solidarity, equality, and care for others if we are able to do so.

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Keep insisting that democracy cannot survive if intimidation sets the agenda.

No doubt others will have their ideas. This post is one where I strongly suspect the comments that will be posted below it will be of real value. Please share your ideas.

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [here](#).

One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.

Comments

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