

Protest is democracy in motion, not a crime

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Around the world, people are marching: against Trump's authoritarianism in the USA, Macron's failures in France, and the cruelty of Gaza policy in the UK. Everywhere, governments are asking 'how to stop protest?', when they should be asking 'why people feel the need to protest?'

In this video, I argue that protest is a democratic safety valve — a sign that governments are failing to meet basic human needs like food, housing, warmth, dignity, and justice. When people protest, it's because they have been ignored.

Governments that suppress protest aren't defending democracy; they are betraying it.

The real question is not how to silence dissent, but how to listen and act on what it tells us.

Watch now to explore why protest is essential to democratic life — and what it tells us about political failure and the possibility of renewal.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CE4vwdSfdcY&si=tf9hLEbYM_SWItEe

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=k5ezv-198cf91-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Why do people protest?

They are around the world.

People are protesting in the USA against Trump.

People are protesting in the UK about what's happening in Gaza.

People are protesting in France about what Emmanuel Macron is doing in his failed government.

And everywhere governments are saying, "How do we stop these protests?" as if people shouldn't have the right to object to what they're up to, when I suggest they should be asking, "Why do people feel the need to protest?"

That [alternative question](#) was put out by Roy Lilley, who's a campaigner on the NHS, and I thought he had a perfect point to make. That question should be everywhere because governments should be asking the question of themselves, "Why is it that people feel the need to protest about what we are doing? What is wrong that is upsetting people when it is our job to serve the people of this country?" If they remember what that duty is, of course.

That question defines the difference between governing by fear, which is what too many governments are now trying to do, and governing with consent, which is, of course, what should happen in a democracy.

In a democracy, protest is not an inconvenience to be managed. It is a constitutional safety valve. Protest actually delivers us a form of information, and incredibly valuable information at that.

Protest tells the system that it is not meeting people's needs. It is, in other words, failing.

When people have access to food and warmth and housing and healthcare and dignity and freedom, they do not march. They march when those things are denied to them. People have to get angry to march, and when they're satisfied, they won't protest.

So the question is not how to stop protests. It is, instead, how can the state, which has the power to deliver well-being, and the duty to deliver well-being, I would suggest, why has it chosen not to use that power for the common good?

And remember, the constraint on that delivery is one that comes down to political will. No government in a country like the UK or the USA is constrained by a lack of money. They have central banks that can create all the money they need. They can find the resources within their economy to divert them into the activities that will prevent the need for protest.

That is possible. People know that this is the case because they saw this happen in 2008, and they saw this happen again in 2020. They know that the argument that there is no money left is not a good one. They know that if they are not getting what they need, it is because somebody in power has decided not to deliver it to them.

The fact is that protest is democracy in motion. When the state treats dissent as a threat, it says that only those already in power have the right to speak. But in a genuine democracy, government must be accountable to those who object. In fact, dissent is the oxygen of public life in a democracy. Drive it underground, and discontent rises because people can see inequality, insecurity, the collapse of services, unaffordable housing, climate anxiety, and injustice. And they know that these things are the result of deliberate fiscal and political choices.

That is what is driving discontent. And what people want is to see the government working for them. They want schools rebuilt, transport restored, homes insulated, care improved, and justice delivered. They know that the state can do these things because they saw governments do it in 2009 and in 2020.

The fact is, the economy must serve people and not the other way round. And this is the big issue that governments are not understanding when they ask the question, "Why are people protesting and how do we stop them doing so?", instead of listening to them and trying to solve the underlying problems.

If only they listened, if only they respected people, they would, in fact, not be trying to suppress dissent. They would be guaranteeing people the right to assemble, because when people have something to say, the government should be listening.

The police should be facilitating protests and not suppressing them. Of course, I do mean peaceful protest, and I do mean that this involves protests by different groups, those who even disagree with each other, but that fact should be recognised as a right as well. The right to disagree is fundamental to democracy.

The job of government is not to suppress, but to listen and to reconcile. Suppressing dissent destroys the legitimacy that protest exists to defend.

Protest is a sign of failure in government policy, because people have to get pretty angry before they'll get off their butts and get out with a placard and walk the street saying, "It's time for change."

But the government has the power to change things if people feel that strongly about them.

It has the power to reconcile interests.

It has the power to explain.

The constraint then is political, but not financial.

The government has to have the confidence that it can either defend its policies or be big enough to change them.

It has to have the confidence that it can hear people and reconcile differences.

It has to have the confidence that it can persuade and not suppress.

Peaceful protest must be protected as democracy's most visible expression. You can silence a protester, but you cannot legislate away their fears or people's ultimate right to protest. They will always do that if things are bad enough.

So what we really need are not governments that can work out how to impose an unjust rule of law, but governments that are big enough to listen. That's what we need.

What do you think? Do you think we have a right to protest?

Do you think that the government should facilitate protests?

Do you think the government should listen to the protesters?

Do you think they should change as a result of the protest?

We think that these things matter, or we wouldn't have made this video, but let us know what you think. There's a poll down below, and leave us comments. We do read them, and they do influence how we make future videos.

Poll

[poll id="228"]

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