Funding the Future

Why we need to ask 'Why do people feel the need to prot...

Published: January 13, 2026, 3:54 am

Roy Lilley asked this question this morning in his daily email, which usually focuses on NHS issues:

“Instead of asking, ‘How do we stop protests?’ policymakers should ask, ‘Why do people feel the need to protest?’…”

That question should be everywhere this morning, and most especially in the government. Answering it would define the difference between governing by fear and governing with consent. The first seeks silence. The second listens, understands, and responds.

The fact is that in a democracy, protest is not an inconvenience to be managed: it is a constitutional safety valve. When governments act in ways that ignore the needs of the people, protest is how democracy breathes. To criminalise protest is to asphyxiate democracy.

That is, firstly, because protest is a form of information. It tells us that the systems meant to meet needs are failing. When people have access to food, warmth, housing, healthcare, dignity, and freedom to be themselves and express their opinions, they tend not to march. They march when those things are denied. So, if there are protests, the question is not how to stop them, but how the state, which has the power to create and deliver well-being, has chosen not to use that power.

Second, the real constraint on creating well-being is never money, but always political will. If there is hardship and anger, that is not because there is “no money left.” It is because those in power have decided not to use it to serve the public. Protest, then, becomes the democratic reply to deliberate neglect.

Third, those in power mistake quiet for stability. It is not. Aggrieved people may stay home for a while, whether out of exhaustion, fear, or lack of hope, but that is not consent. Real stability comes from fairness, inclusion and a sense that everyone has a stake in the future. When that breaks down, legitimacy fails, and the sound of protest is

not disorder; it is a warning.

Fourth, spending billions on policing discontent is absurd when the same resources could remove its causes. When governments choose not to use their power to provide jobs, fund decent housing, ensure fair pay, invest in climate transition, and invest in justice, they guarantee unrest. In particular, austerity is not a cost-saving measure. It is a cost-shifting exercise from the Treasury to households, from the rich to the poor, and from the present to the future. Protest makes that visible.

Fifth, 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 always be accountable to those who object. If protest is driven underground, society begins to die because dissent is the oxygen of public life.

So what would change if policymakers really asked why people protest, as Roy Lilley suggests they should?

First, they would acknowledge that the causes of discontent, whether they be inequality, insecurity, collapsing services, unaffordable housing, climate anxiety or concern at injustice, are the result of deliberate fiscal and political choices. In most cases, this is the result of the Treasury's obsession with arbitrary debt and deficit targets, which is a deliberate choice to maintain inequality, rather than an economic necessity. In others, it is the decision to support the politics that demands that these anti-social choices be maintained.

Second, they would rebuild trust by spending with purpose. People want to see evidence that government works for them: schools rebuilt, transport restored, homes insulated, care services improved, and justice delivered. The state can always create the money to do these things. What it cannot create is legitimacy once it is lost.

Third, they would ensure that the economy serves the people, not the other way around. That means taxing to shape society, not to fund spending. In other words, they would use taxes to curb inflation, close inequality gaps, and redirect excessive wealth into productive use. It also means offering safe savings routes where people can invest directly in the public good, such as green bonds and local development funds, rather than feeding speculative markets. If this were to happen, people would feel they have a stake in their society, when they suspect they have none at present.

Fourth, they would protect the right to protest itself. The right to assemble and dissent is not a nuisance but a constitutional duty. The police should be trained to facilitate protest, not suppress it. Governments should respond to protests with listening, not legislation.

The consequences of ignoring all this are not hypothetical. When governments deny that they can act, people stop believing that politics matters. Despair breeds

disengagement, or worse, extremism.

So the conclusions follow:

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Protest is a sign of failure in government policy, not failure in policing.

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The government has the power to end the causes of protest by using its fiscal and political capacity to meet real needs.

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The constraint is political, not financial.

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Peaceful protest must be protected as the most visible expression of democracy.

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Listening and acting on the causes of protest is the true measure of a government’s strength.

If those in power truly wish to “stop” protests, they could do so tomorrow by ending needless austerity, investing in people and places, and proving that democracy still works by respecting calls for justice that must be implicit within it. But if they choose instead to criminalise dissent, they will learn a certain truth, which is that you can silence a protester, but you cannot legislate away the reasons people protest.