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False Alarms

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Using entirely bogus pretexts, the police are deploying oppressive new laws to shut down peaceful protest.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 12th May 2023

The more unequal a society becomes, the more oppressive its laws must be. This, I think, explains new acts that would not be out of place in a police state. So vague and broad are the powers granted to the police under last year's [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act](#) and this year's [Public Order Act](#) that it is no longer clear where their abuse begins and ends.

At two o'clock on the morning of the coronation, the Metropolitan Police, using the Police Act, arrested three people in Soho for carrying rape alarms. The police claimed they were acting on intelligence that rape alarms might be used to frighten the horses that would later be parading elsewhere.

The people they arrested were [volunteers working for Westminster city council](#) as "Night Stars", helping to stop the sexual harassment of women. They give rape alarms to women who might need them. The [alarms are funded by the Home Office](#). [Night Stars volunteers wear pink tabards](#) emblazoned with the logo of their partner organisation ... the Metropolitan Police. Yet the three volunteers who were arrested were cuffed for three hours and held for 14 before being released on bail.

Why would the police arrest their own partners? What was the "intelligence" on which they were acting? If they were really worried about rape alarms being misused, why did they not simply confiscate them? It looks to me like the old *paso doble* between police and press. Two weeks before, the Mail on Sunday had run a front-page story headlined "[Extremists' vile plot to spook King's horses with rape alarms](#): Fears protesters planning to sabotage Charles' Coronation could cause 'serious injuries or even deaths' ... as eco-zealot groups set to join forces to cause chaos".

The Mail produced precisely zero evidence that environmental or republican activists were planning such a thing. But if the police wanted to find people carrying these devices, they knew where to go. The arrests were used by the Mail as a [vindication of its story](#). Though Westminster council had explained to the newspaper that those arrested were its volunteers, the Mail described them as “militant activists ... arrested over a plot to throw rape alarms at horses during King Charles’s Coronation”.

Were it not for the patient work of the [journalist Mic Wright](#), that’s how the story would have stood. Police and press are two tails of the same beast. The head of media at the Metropolitan police is [a former crime reporter at the Daily Mail](#).

The new laws were also [used pre-emptively](#) to arrest campaigners from Republic and Just Stop Oil, and a [journalist filming them](#), to thwart their vile plot to wear dangerous T-shirts and hold seditious placards. For good measure, the police [rounded up](#) some Animal Rising activists at a training session miles away from the coronation. Safer to arrest everyone who might dissent.

These laws have been introduced just as public trust in the police has collapsed. [Louise Casey’s report](#), released in March, found the Metropolitan Police to be institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic. Yet the police have now been granted discretionary powers so broad that they can shut down any protest, on the vaguest suspicion that it might prove to be “disruptive”. It’s a green light for even greater abuses.

The Police Act 2022 was bad enough, redefining “serious disruption” so widely that it could be applied to almost any situation, greatly increasing the penalties for acts of peaceful protest and creating a new and remarkably vague offence of [“intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance”](#), with a penalty of up to 10 years in prison. [Half the people arrested](#) at or around the coronation were detained on this charge. But the Public Order Act 2023 is much worse.

The new offences it creates have been designed to allow the police to shut down every form of effective protest. If you chain yourself to the railings or attach yourself to anything or anyone else you [could be jailed for 51 weeks](#). If you carry equipment that the police claim could be used for such a purpose, you could also be breaking the law: at the coronation, protesters were [arrested for the possession of string and luggage straps](#).

The act imposes blanket bans on [protests against new roads](#), fracking or any other [oil and gas works](#). If, as the anti-roads protester [Swampy](#) famously did, you [dig a tunnel](#) – or even

[enter one](#) – you can be imprisoned for three years.

The act greatly expands the police power of [suspicionless stop and search](#), which has been used to such [discriminatory effect against black people](#). Anyone can now be searched if a police inspector or any other senior officer “reasonably believes” protests might happen somewhere in the area, or that someone somewhere might be carrying a “prohibited object”. If you resist a search, you can be imprisoned for 51 weeks.

The act introduces “[serious disruption prevention orders](#)”, whose purpose seems to be to take out what the police call “[aggravated activists](#)”: experienced campaigners and organisers, without whom coherent protests don’t happen. The orders impose sweeping restrictions on these people, preventing them from attending or encouraging protests, confining them to particular places, forcing them to report to police stations, prohibiting them from associating with others. They can extend, if the police and courts so choose, effectively to house arrest. They blur the line between civil standards of proof and criminal punishment: an order can be applied on a mere “balance of probabilities”, but if you breach its terms you can be imprisoned for 51 weeks. The order can last for two years, then be renewed for a further two.

The orders are among several forms of pre-emptive control and punishment permitted by the act. It necessitates a great widening of police surveillance, to identify people deemed likely to commit one of the new crimes. It has been introduced while the [undercover policing inquiry](#), which continues to reveal appalling abuses by police spying on peaceful campaigners [continues](#). They can do what they want to us now.

These are the state-of-emergency laws you would expect in the aftermath of a coup. But there is no public order emergency, just an emergency of another kind, that the protesters targeted by this legislation are trying to stop: the collapse of Earth systems. We are being compelled by law to accept the destruction of the living world.

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