

George Monbiot

The Oligarch's Oligarch

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Just as we need to get the money out of politics, we have been gifted a Prime Minister who represents the ultra-rich.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 26th October 2022

Before we decide what needs to change, let's take stock of what we have lost. I want to begin with what happened last week. I don't mean the resignation of the prime minister. This is more important.

Almost all the media reported a [scripted comment](#) by the newly reinstated home secretary, Suella Braverman, about the “Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati”. Astonishingly, scarcely any of them reported what she was doing at the time. She was pushing through the House of Commons the most repressive legislation of the modern era.

Under the [public order bill](#), anyone who has protested in the previous five years, or has encouraged other people to protest, can be forced to “submit to ... being fitted with, or the installation of, any necessary apparatus” to monitor their movements. In other words, if you attend or support any protest in which “serious disruption to two or more individuals or to an organisation” occurs, you can be forced to wear an electronic tag. “[Serious disruption](#)” was redefined by the 2022 Police Act to include noise.

This is just one of a series of astounding measures in the bill, which has been hardly remarked upon in public life as it passes through Britain's legislature. What we see here is two losses in one moment: the final erasure of the right to protest, and political journalism's mutation from reporting substance to reporting spectacle. These are just the latest of our losses.

So extreme has inequality become, and so dangerous is the combination of frozen wages, lagging benefits, rising rents and mortgage repayments, soaring bills and food inflation, that millions of people are being pushed towards destitution. Unless something changes,

many will [soon lose their homes](#). In the midst of this crisis, we have been gifted a prime minister who owns four luxury “homes”. One of them is an [empty flat in Kensington](#) that he reserves for visiting relatives.

While Rishi Sunak was chancellor, the government repeatedly delayed its manifesto promise to [ban no-fault evictions](#). Landlords are [ruthlessly exploiting this power](#) to throw their tenants on to the street or use the threat to force them to accept outrageous rent rises and dismal conditions. Had Sunak’s “help to buy” mortgage scheme succeeded ([it was a dismal flop](#)), it would have raised house prices, increasing rents and making ownership less accessible: the opposite of its stated aim. But this, as with all such schemes, was surely its true purpose: to inflate the assets of existing owners, the Conservative party’s base.

Public services are collapsing at breathtaking speed. Headteachers warn that 90% of schools in England [could run out of money](#) next year. NHS dentistry is on the verge of extinction. Untold numbers are now living in constant pain and, in some cases, [extracting their own teeth](#). The suspicion that the NHS is being deliberately dismembered, its core services allowed to fail so that we cease to defend it against privatisation, rises ever higher in the mind.

But Sunak appears determined only to [hack ever further](#). Sitting on a [family fortune of £730m](#), he seems unmoved by the plight of people so far removed from him in wealth that they must seem to exist on another planet. He is the oligarch’s oligarch, ever responsive to the demands of big capital and the three offshore plutocrats who own the country’s biggest newspapers, oblivious of the needs of the 67 million people who live here.

After 12 years of Conservative austerity and chaos, the very rich have taken almost everything. They have even captured virtue. They now appropriate the outward signs of an ethical life while continuing – despite or because of their organic cotton jackets and [second homes](#), their electric cars and [pasture-fed meat](#), their carbon offsets and ayahuasca retreats, philanthropy and holidays in quiet resorts whose palm-thatched cabins mimic the vernacular of the people evicted to make way for them – to grasp the lion’s share of everything.

Corruption is embedded in public life. Fraud is [scarcely prosecuted](#). Organised crime has been so widely facilitated, through the destruction of the state’s capacity to regulate everything from [money laundering](#) to [waste dumping](#), that you could almost believe it was deliberate. Our rivers have been [reduced to sewers](#), our soil is washing off the land, the planning system is being dismantled, and [hundreds of environmental laws are now under](#)

[threat](#). We hurtle towards Earth systems oblivion, while frenetically talking about anything but.

In other words, it's not just a general election we need, it's a complete rethink of who we are and where we stand. It's not just proportional representation we need, but radical devolution to the lowest possible levels at which decisions can be made, accompanied by [deliberative, participatory democracy](#). It's not just new lobbying laws we require, but a comprehensive programme to get the money out of politics, ending all private political donations, breaking up the billionaire press and demanding full financial transparency for everyone in public life. We should seek not only the repeal of repressive legislation, but – as civil disobedience is the bedrock of democracy – positive rights to protest.

All this now feels far away. Jeremy Corbyn offered some (though by no means all) of these reforms. Keir Starmer offers none. Though Labour MPs voted against the public order bill, his only public comment so far has been to [endorse its headline policy](#): longer sentences for people who glue themselves to roads. But if the Labour party or its future coalition partners can persuade him to agree to just one aspect of this programme, proportional representation, we can start work on the rest, building the political alliances that could transform the life of this nation. Without PR, we're stuck with a dysfunctional duopoly, in hock to the billionaire press and the millionaires it appoints to govern us. We cannot carry on like this.

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