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'Protests that were not allowed': does Britain have a two-tier policing problem?

Freedom of information request reveals 21 of 24 marches banned in last 30 years were proposed by far-right groups



Police form a cordon as counter-protesters meet a Unite the Kingdom rally in London in October. Claims have been made that police treat white, far-right protesters more harshly than others. Photograph: Christopher Walls/Sopa Images/Rex/Shutterstock



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The list, provided by the Home Office nine months after a freedom of information request, could be viewed as fresh ammunition for those propagating the idea that Britain has a “[two-tier policing](#)” problem - the theory that police treat white, far-right protesters more harshly than others.

Similar claims of unjust bias have long been made against the police over their treatment of minority groups, in particular in the execution of stop and search policies. But the newest incarnation of the catchy allegation has some far more powerful advocates.

They include the world’s richest man, Elon Musk, who in August described the prime minister as “[two-tier Keir](#)” during the police crackdown on the summer rioters, and the former home secretary Suella Braverman, who was sacked after she defied No 10 to accuse the Metropolitan police commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, of [applying a “double standard”](#). She had claimed in an article in the Times that Rowley was taking a tougher stance with rightwing demonstrations than those held in London by pro-Palestine groups.

Things came to a head on Armistice Day when Rowley declined Braverman’s suggestions that he [ban a pro-Palestinian march](#) through London. Does, then, Britain have a two-tier policing problem?



📷 The former home secretary Suella Braverman accused the Met commissioner of taking a tougher stance against rightwing demonstrators than with pro-Palestinian groups. Photograph: Martin Pope/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Sir Hugh Orde was president of the Association of Chief Police Officers, representing the 44 police forces of England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 2009 and 2015. Before that he was chief constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, an organisation that was, in part, born out of a determination to convince the Catholic community that their safety and lives were every bit as important to the state as those of the Protestant

majority. The sweeping-away of the Royal Ulster Constabulary in favour of the PSNI was the answer to the persuasive claim of two-tier policing in Northern Ireland.

Orde, who was also a deputy assistant commissioner in the Met earlier in his career, does not believe that UK policing has such a problem today. However, he does believe that the loudly expressed accusations are a symptom of a more fundamental issue, and that it will require reform every bit as far-reaching as that enacted in Northern Ireland.

“I don’t think there’s some intentional and determined conspiracy,” he said. “Conspiracy theories are becoming the norm now, like fake news, but I don’t think it’s that organised.”

Orde said he instead feared that British policing had lost the trust of the people it served. “The moment you start losing the confidence of the community in the day-to-day routine interactions, you get this, because that’s where you buy your legitimacy,” he said. “The legitimacy of policing is built on trust, on everyday interactions from the bottom up between police and citizen. Without that trust, confidence and legitimacy a model that relies on public support and consent is at risk.”

In the year ending March 2024, only 6.4% of crimes in England and Wales were solved. That compares with 15.5% of crimes being solved in the first quarter of 2015. There is ample evidence to suggest that many day-to-day crimes are often simply ignored by police forces that are facing ever-increasing demands but have dwindling resources.

A recent analysis of the performance of the Met found that between January and September 2023, 66% of thefts from motor vehicles, 57% of bicycle thefts and 31% of arson offences were being “screened out”, a policing term for when officers decide that it would not be a practical or proportionate use of resources to launch an inquiry into a recorded crime. And it is likely to get worse.

Ten forces wrote to the home secretary, Yvette Cooper, predicting that they would have to cut thousands of police jobs under an imminent police funding settlement. The Met is braced for reductions of up to 2,300 officers out of a force of 34,000, as well as 400 fewer civilian staff.



📷 Sir Hugh Orde, a former president of the Association of Chief Police Officers and chief constable, advised taking community policing seriously, and making sure 'policing was visible'. Photograph: Loch Earn/Shutterstock

The last royal commission on policing was launched in 1960. “Why on earth would a structure designed then be fit for purpose now?” said Orde. It was time, he suggested, for a thoroughgoing reform involving the merger of forces and rethinking of their purpose.


“I think the answer is to build a structure from the bottom up and take community policing seriously,” he said. “I’d make sure policing was visible. I walk around **London** and rarely see cops, the same applies to where I live. If the police don’t hold the streets so the citizen feels safe, nothing else really matters.”

With regard to the domination of far-right initiatives on the list of banned “processions”, Dr Kathryn Higgins, a lecturer in global digital politics at Goldsmiths, University of London, said it was a subversion of reality to suggest that it was evidence of the subjugation of the white working class. “It doesn’t surprise me that the majority of banned protests are organised by white supremacist and far-right groups, because of the deliberate appeals both to violence and to hate that animate those movements,” she said.

“OK, we have 21 protests that were not allowed. It’s a different matter to say those were specifically not allowed because of a system of white subjugation,

or because we allegedly have a country where far-right politics is broadly excluded - because the very same discourses and claims that were being espoused by the rioters in the UK were also being espoused by Tory politicians in parliament. So, these are not fringe political ideas by any means.”

Orde said the decisions on bans would have been based on “threat” but, crucially, not just that posed by allowing a protest to take place. There was a calculation to be made about the consequences of banning a mass demonstration too, he said.

 Metropolitan police deploy a heavy presence as Kurdish groups march from Trafalgar Square to Downing Street on 1 December 2024. Photograph: Guy Smallman/Getty Images

Sources involved in the decision by Rowley not to ban the large pro-Palestinian marches in London this year corroborated that analysis. “[Braverman] was triggered initially by the Palestinian flags, and then it was those people wearing balaclavas,” a source who was involved in the discussions recalled. “The police could not see a serious risk of disturbance and that was proved right.”

The police made an error in trialling a system in which the Crown Prosecution Service was allowed into the control room during the protests to advise on potential arrests, it was suggested. This was said to have created the impression of officers going soft.

“It had meant officers did not arrest people in the way they normally would, but that was changed later,” a source said. “But in terms of the two-tier thing, in a way there was a two-tier policy but it was to do with the size of the crowd. If you want to ban and then police a ban on a far-right march, that’s quite simple as they are small. The pro-Palestinian marches were huge, and you would create a riot by storming in. It was two-tier policing, but not in the way that was said.”

As part of the sweeping reforms necessary, Orde suggested the country as a whole could look to emulate Northern Ireland's model of a parades commission that takes decisions about marches out of the hands of officers. "As a chief, you've got to make a decision, is it better to let it run? Is it going to be more violent if I shut it or if I let it run? If the police make the decision you are on a hiding to nothing."

For now, the accusations against the police continued to swirl on social media as a lack of resource to deal with crime in the community was misinterpreted as evidence of a lack of will, Orde suggested. "The gap between supply and demand is such that it's doomed to fail if you simply try some sort of incremental reform," he said. "It's got to be root and branch now."

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