

British Tuition Fee Protest, November 9, 2010, London¹

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The 2010 decision by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat governing coalition in Britain to allow universities to virtually triple tuition fees was part of a package of measures designed to cut the government's higher education budget almost in half (from £7.1bn to £4.2bn) in just four years. The decision sparked what has widely been seen as one of the largest and most active social movements seen in Britain in some years – described by one commentator as “a grassroots social movement the breadth of which some feel we have not seen since the late 1960s”.²

The movement, composed overwhelmingly of school, college, and university students, emerged effectively overnight after the results of the Browne Review, commissioned by the previous Labour government to consider the future direction of higher education funding in Britain, were published on 12 October 2010. The review, which was chaired by Lord Browne of Madingley, former chief executive of BP, provided a blueprint for the neoliberal transformation of higher education in Britain.³ As Cambridge professor Stefan Collini remarked, its central position was that “we should no longer think of higher education as the provision of a public good” that is “largely financed by public funds” but instead “as a lightly regulated market in which consumer demand, in the form of student choice, is sovereign in determining what is offered by service providers (i.e. universities).” The report's recommendation to completely eliminate the annual block grant currently made by the government to universities to underwrite their teaching is, noted Collini, “more than simply a ‘cut’, even a draconian one” because “it signals a redefinition of higher education and the retreat of the state from financial responsibility for it” – higher education effectively transformed from a public good to a marketised private product.⁴

Mass meetings were held in colleges and universities immediately after the results of the review were published, leading to the formation of dozens of autonomous groups across the country. A wave of spontaneous action followed: dozens of universities went under occupation, and a mass demonstration was held in London that drew up to 52,000 people. During the demonstration the

¹ This event analysis draws mainly on secondary data from British newspaper reports, with reference to some academic studies published between 1971 and 1988.

² Patrick Kingsley, “The new age of student protest”, *The Guardian*, 29 November 2010.

³ The other members of the review panel were: Sir Michael Barber, advisor to a former Labour minister; Diane Coyle, a former Treasury economist; David Eastwood and Julia King, university vice chancellors; Rajay Naik, a Big Lottery Fund board member; and Peter Sands, a banker.

⁴ Stefan Collini, “Browne's Gamble”, *London Review of Books*, 32/21, 4 November 2010.

Millbank tower in London, which houses the headquarters of the Conservative Party, was occupied, setting the protest apart from the general tendency of British protests to conform to assigned routes and avoid direct action.

Initially condemned by institutional leaders, including the president of the National Union of Students (NUS) and the general secretary of the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), the new commitment to non-violent direct action received vocal and widespread support amongst grassroots members of the broader movement. As a result, many of those who had opposed the method of protest were quickly forced to backtrack – the NUS President famously apologising for what he called his “spineless” lack of support for university occupations. Further demonstrations were held in London on 24 and 30 November, drawing large crowds and punitive police responses. This took the form of a renewed police commitment to the open-air imprisonment of protesters known as “kettling”. As the day of the scheduled vote on education reform in the House of Commons approached, students prepared for another mass demonstration outside the Houses of Parliament in central London. The vote, which passed, and the demonstration, both took place on December 9.

December 9: “I didn’t see anything in their eyes”

On the day of the tuition fee vote in Parliament, an estimated 50,000 people, including many schoolchildren, took part in two demonstrations that had been organised in central London: one by the NUS; the second (substantially larger) by the University of London Union (ULU) and the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC). The larger protest marched from Bloomsbury towards Parliament, where the Metropolitan police had already stationed lines of riot police, blocking access to the building. At around 2pm, protesters pushed down barriers and entered Parliament Square, the public square opposite the Houses of Parliament, with “the centre of Parliament Square taken over in a matter of moments.”⁵ By 2.32pm, the Guardian reported that the “entire police line has just switched to riot gear” and, at 2.52pm, that the protesters were becoming “increasing [*sic*] frustrated at having nowhere to go.” The kettle had already begun: by around half past three, the Metropolitan police officially confirmed that “containment” was in place.

In keeping with a now wearily familiar pattern, which is well understood by the police, the atmosphere of a substantially calm protest was transformed by the “containment” which lasted all day – most were unable to leave for eight hours or more – and by the behaviour of the police. The journalist Shiv Malik reported at 4.30pm that he had been knocked down by “a baton strike” that fell “directly onto the crown of my head” – “I felt a big whacking thud and I heard it reverberating inside my head.” He “asked a police officer” if he “was bleeding”, but the reply was: “Keep moving, keep moving”; at this point Malik realised

⁵ *The Guardian*, “Student protests – as they happened”, 9 December 2010.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/blog/2010/dec/09/student-protests-live-coverage?INTCMP=SRCH>

"there was blood everywhere" and "asked another police officer, who was wearing a police medic badge, if he could help me" but was told "to move away" and "go to another exit", by which point "blood was streaming down the back of my head." Malik was eventually assisted by student protesters and had to walk a substantial distance to catch a cab to hospital.⁶

This treatment of protesters and even journalists – imprisonment, police violence, and subsequent refusal of medical attention – became so commonplace throughout the day that there was little discussion of it, especially in the British press, which virtually censored reports such as these. A minor exception was one regional page on the BBC website – the small "Sheffield and South Yorkshire" page – which flatly contradicted, in unusual detail, the BBC's main position on the demonstration. The page consists of an account by a 17-year-old girl who had been on the protest and is worth quoting in some detail. "Still shaken up, with tremors in her voice," the girl described "angry clashes" with her and her friends "caught between the violence and police." With no escape route, trapped in the kettle, they were pushed towards the police, who "saw us coming towards them, these teenage girls who wanted to go home"; the police "didn't show any mercy whatsoever" but "threw around my friends who were just 17 year old slim girls", "beating" them "with batons"; "They didn't show any sympathy in their voice and I didn't see anything in their eyes."

Her mother, who spoke to her on the phone at this point, said: "She was crying down the phone, I could hear girls screaming and crying in the background. It was the most horrible, scary thing I've heard." She called the Metropolitan Police who advised that the girls should go to the front line again and ask to be let out; the girls proceeded to do this, but "after begging in tears to be let out" they were "halted by another" police line; by this point "traumatised" and "crying" – "We were begging to, please, just let us go home" – they were "pushed forward a second time", pleading with the police "'please don't hurt us, just don't hurt us, we want to go home", when she "was pushed into a ditch by a police officer" and "turned around to see a group of my friends on the floor getting beaten by police officers"; another friend "who didn't manage to escape" "was thrown to the floor by the neck" and "beaten on the floor by three police officers until he was throwing up blood" at which point "they just threw him aside", "didn't give him any medical attention" and "moved on" to the next protester.⁷

It is an interesting exercise to check the British press coverage of the protest and note how many times experiences such as these were reported – as compared, for example, to the experiences of members of the royal family. It is also worth scanning the press coverage for a single mention of what was obvious to anyone at the protest: that these police strategies were systematic, deliberate, and

⁶ *The Guardian*, "Student protests – as they happened", 9 December 2010.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/blog/2010/dec/09/student-protests-live-coverage?INTCMP=SRCH>

⁷ BBC, "Barnsley girl's account of violence at fees protest", 10 December 2010.

applied with the full knowledge that they endangered the safety and lives of protesters, including young children.

The squeeze of “containment”

The tactics of the British police, who have benefitted from a decade of repressive legislation that is probably unparalleled in British history, had by December 9 been carefully developed to the point where they put an amusing perspective on the notion of a right to protest or free assembly. Open-air imprisonment, or kettling, has long been a favourite tactic. It has the double effect of frustrating protesters, precipitating attempts to leave that can be quickly painted as “violent clashes” caused by “anarchist protesters”, as well as substantially raising the costs in time, comfort and safety for those planning to attend protests. It dissuades many from even attempting to attend. These effects are so obvious and widely noted that it takes a significant departure from rationality to assume that they are not the intentions of the police when the tactics are planned.

Kettling has been controversially supported by the British courts when it has been challenged, such as in *Austin v Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis*, as breaching Article 5 of the European Convention of Human Rights. (Court cases, including one started after the December 9 protest, are ongoing). A significant number of legal academics and experts regard the tactic as illegal because it directly breaches the rights to liberty and lawful detention. More recent police tactics developed in specific response to the student movement include “squeezing” the kettle, which involves charging into crowds of protesters, including with horses, containing people into spaces to the extent where any movement becomes difficult.

As was noted in the days following December 9, protesters had been “forced ... into such a tight ‘kettle’ on Westminster Bridge that they were in danger of being seriously crushed or pushed into the freezing River Thames”, with a senior doctor “who set up a field hospital in Parliament Square” noting that the police “had us so closely packed, I couldn't move my feet or hands an inch”; a situation that they remained in “for hours”, with people “having real difficulty breathing” – “the most disturbing thing I've ever seen,” remarked the doctor, who “repeatedly” “tried to speak to officers” and was inevitably ignored: “I'm surprised that no one died there.”⁸ Video evidence of the same tactic being employed at a different police line on the same protest led to the police being condemned by some of their own advisers, including a the chair of the Metropolitan Police Authority's civil liberties panel. The panel said the footage was “appalling” and “ghastly”; another panel member commenting that the incident was the “most disturbing so far in a sequence that gets more risky and

⁸ *The Guardian*, “Kettle tactics risk Hillsborough-style tragedy – doctor”. 19 December 2010

threatening with each repeat": "The use of horses in such a situation is astonishing."⁹

As well as adopting tactics that seriously endangered the safety of protesters, the police (as seen with Shiv Malik above) showed a marked lack of interest in assisting people who had been injured. In the most prominent case, Alfie Meadows, a 20-year-old student who required emergency brain surgery after being hit on the head by a police truncheon, was taken in an ambulance to the nearest hospital only to be told, according to his mother, that it "had been given over to police injuries" and was "asked to take Alfie to another hospital"; they were moved into a different room because the police were "finding it upsetting to see protesters in the hospital".¹⁰ But despite condemnations such as those by the Metropolitan Police Authority's civil liberties panel, revealingly rare in the press, the response of the British government has been to condemn the student protesters and suggest that the admirable restraint the police have shown in their handling of violent dissent has perhaps been stretched too far.

Post-protest crackdown

On 26 November, after the mass "Millbank" demonstration, the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Paul Stephenson stated that "the game has changed"; the police "are going to be much more cautious" and "will be putting far more assets in place."¹¹ Stephenson's remarks were misleading: the tactics the police employed during the subsequent protests were not especially new, but a continuation of a package of repressive tactics developed during the previous government. Similarly, the manner in which the police have subsequently moved to criminalise protesters is familiar – at least to those who have been paying attention.

At a series of demonstrations held outside the Israeli Embassy in London in December 2008 and January 2009, protesting Israel's attack on Palestinians in Gaza and British complicity, protesters were met with predictable aggression from police. After the demonstrations 119 people were arrested for offences under "violent disorder" legislation. Most were arrested months after the protest using police intelligence from Forward Intelligence Teams (FIT), many in dawn raids on their homes in which entire families were handcuffed.¹² After being

⁹ *The Guardian*, "Kettling video 'appalling', police watchdog panel chair says", 22 December 2010

¹⁰ A subsequent "internal investigation" by the Metropolitan police stated that the mother's claim had been "disproved", without providing alternative evidence, and issued a press statement that was obediently reported by the national media. This fits neatly into a pattern of systematic distortion and self-exoneration that has become a trademark of the Metropolitan police.

¹¹ BBC, "Met Police commissioner predicts 'disorder' on streets", 25 November 2010

¹² <http://gazademosupport.org.uk/about-2/about/>

pressured by presiding judges and their own defences to plead guilty to violent disorder charges, overwhelmingly resulting from harmless acts like throwing an empty bottle towards a gate, the young defendants suddenly found themselves facing sentences of eighteen months or two years in prison. A group formed to support the protesters noted at the time that: "Thousands of British people feel that they no longer have the option of attending a political demonstration without being targeted by the police."¹³ The Metropolitan police were much later forced to pay a substantial sum to two brothers after they won a civil claim following police assault at the demonstration (their initial complaint to the police had, of course, been quickly dismissed).¹⁴ Inevitably, most of the police violence at the demonstration remained unchallenged. Barely any of the young people who were targeted during and after were in a position to engage with a complicated and biased complaints system, let alone file civil claims, when their families, in some cases, could barely afford to visit them in prison.

Adapting their tactics for the growing student movement, the Metropolitan police after the 10 November Millbank protest began issuing to the press photographs of protesters whom they wished to "trace" in connection with "violence."¹⁵ This decision, most likely devised by (or in conjunction with) the £6.8m-a-year Metropolitan Police Department for Public Affairs, effectively criminalises at a stroke dozens of people who have not been charged in connection with any crime. For a police force obsessed with public relations, and heavily funded to ensure its own version of events becomes the mainstream narrative, staged coups such as these have as much to do with shaping the public perception of the social movement as they do with policing it. After the December 9 protest, the police again issued a series of photographs over a number of days and the press compliantly ran the images, often on front pages.

The press tends to avoid reporting police operations as systematic or linked to a broader economic policy, but it does sometimes report particular incidents, which are usually implied to be isolated cases regardless of how often they are repeated. One of these events is worth noting as indicative of current police behaviour. On 7 December – two days before the major tuition fee protest – a 12-year-old boy, Nicky Wishart, organised a protest to take place outside Prime Minister David Cameron's constituency office to "highlight the plight" of Wishart's "youth centre, which is due to close in March next year due to budget cuts." (Wishart lives in Cameron's Oxfordshire constituency.) In response, "the school was contacted by anti-terrorist officers" and the boy was "taken out of his English class" and "interviewed by a Thames Valley officer at the school in the presence of his head of year"; the officer told him "that if any public disorder took place at the event he would be held responsible and arrested": "we will arrest people and if anything happens you will get arrested because you are the

¹³ <http://gazademosupport.org.uk/about-2/about/>

¹⁴ *The Guardian*, "Met pays £25,000 to twins for injuries at Gaza demo", 12 July 2010.

¹⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, "Student protests: police issue pictures in hunt for rioters", 17 November 2010.

organiser." Wishart was told he would be arrested "even if [he] didn't turn up", and that "armed officers will be there so if anything out of line happens ...". The boy's mother, who lives "10 minutes down the road", was not present for the interview.¹⁶

It is currently unclear how many are to be charged in connection with the 9 December protests or how severe the charges will be but the Gaza protest cases, and a catalogue of recent police actions, set troubling precedents.

Repression and redistribution

The repression of the student movement is in direct response to its early success in presenting a serious and dynamic opposition to the British government's expressed plans for public spending cuts that will transform the nature of social provision in Britain. The concomitant development of repression, especially that which is first directed at particular groups before being extended, and neoliberalisation, is a theme which extends back to the 1970s.

The post-1979 Conservative attack on the welfare state, which has been amply documented elsewhere, included early cuts to the higher education budget that look meek in comparison to those currently proposed.¹⁷ But while the government which she led enacted the cuts, Margaret Thatcher personally endowed a £2m chair in "enterprise studies" at Cambridge: the aim was "to promote a wider understanding of the principles of free enterprise, with reference to political and economic freedom and market economy, under the rule of law."¹⁸

And the message was reinforced elsewhere, as public spending was not so much cut (it stayed almost constant) as redirected toward more deserving sectors of society. Privatisation offered the opportunity to undersell public assets through complicated schemes: it was later estimated that at least £10bn, and probably much more, was transferred from public to private hands in this way.¹⁹ Meanwhile, according to a detailed 1988 study, the social housing that "serves the most vulnerable and marginal groups in society" was systematically undermined, a move which was paralleled "by the growth of an underclass of economically and socially excluded households" that transformed the public housing sector to a US-style system of mass social segregation. The "considerable success" that direct state provision had achieved in reducing the connections between low income and poor quality housing was thus substantially reversed, in a pattern that was to become familiar as attacks on

¹⁶ *The Guardian*, "Schoolboy warned by police over picket plan at David Cameron's office", 10 December 2010.

¹⁷ <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=410485>

¹⁸ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/1997-8/weekly/5726/12.html>

¹⁹ BBC, "Privatisation 'needs overhaul' ", September 3 1998.

public provision continued (Forrest and Murie 1988: 11 - 13). All this took place as wealth was redistributed, with state supervision, towards the top income percentiles. In 1989, a Labour politician observed that "an extraordinary transfer of resources, from poor to rich, has taken place."²⁰ The politician was Gordon Brown, under whose tutelage the "extraordinary transfer of resources" continued with renewed vigour. By 2009 Britain was a more unequal country than at any time since modern records began in the early 1960s.²¹ Developments took place in tandem: as fuel poverty more than doubled in the mid-2000s, energy companies were able to post record profits, with British Gas seeing its profits rise 98 percent in the first half of 2010.²²

The growth of black and Asian populations in Britain, a result of postwar labour shortages and a complex imperial history, enabled the development of state repression that mirrored in interesting ways the techniques that had been developed in the colonies to deal with the rise of agency amongst populations in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. By 1982 it was possible for a number of authors to claim that: "the presence of black people in Britain has become constructed ideologically as a national problem, thereby rendering them subject to specific and intense forms of control and repression" (Solomos et al. 1982: 21). Widespread puzzlement was expressed as young people took to the streets in 1980 and 1981 in riots across a series of British cities, even while a decade of reports had been warning of an imminent reaction to police and state provocation. As a police officer had explained to a journalist in 1971: "When these people have their heads full of pot and alcohol, spurred on by the thumping beat of these reggae records, they are not humans any more, and only those who don't like themselves would set out to treat them as humans" (Humphry and John 1971). The same year, National Opinion Polls reported the results of a major survey into race relations: "It is somewhat dismaying to see the extent to which coloured people are critical of the police" (quoted in Hall et al. 1978: 45).

It can be surprising to recall that there was discussion of the "parallel growth of repressive state structures and new racisms" and even "the construction of an authoritarian state in Britain" (Solomos et al. 1982: 9) as early as 1982, because the pre-1997 period is now commonly seen as a virtual liberal paradise. Consider some of the "illiberal laws" highlighted by a major politician in 2006 as in need of repeal: Part 2 of the Extradition Act 2003, which allows for extradition to the US without prima facie evidence; the new conditions created on public assemblies in the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003; new trespass laws and restrictions on protest outside Parliament in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005; the control orders legislation in the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005 that allows for virtual house arrest without charge or trial;

²⁰ John Newsinger, "Brown's Journey from Reformism to Neoliberalism", *International Socialism*, 2 July 2007.

²¹ *The Guardian*, "UK's income gap widest since 60s", 8 May 2009.

²² *The Guardian*, "British Gas sees profits rise 98% in first half of year", 28 July 2010.

and so on. New Labour's record was thus described as: "a frenzied approach to law-making, thousands of new offences, an illiberal belief in heavy-handed regulation, an obsession with controlling the minutiae of everyday life"²³.

The politician who blasted Labour's record of social control here was, of course, Nick Clegg, under whose deputy premiership the current "appalling" and "ghastly" police response to protest takes place. By 2009, a three-year study published by the conservative International Commission of Jurists found that fear over terrorism was used to undermine human rights law and introduce repressive measures of social control that were illegal and counter-productive,²⁴ while in the same year a United Nations report criticised the UK for violating international bans on torture by participating in the illegal US "renditions" programme.²⁵ All this barely constitutes a footnote to Britain's involvement in international torture and domestic repression, a record which is by now truly impressive.

While the British press have been tellingly incapable of presenting alternatives to the public sector cuts – though detailed alternatives, of course, exist²⁶ – it has been impossible to ignore the growing influence of the new student movement, which grew weekly in effectiveness as the police response became predictably more severe. It is yet too early to tell whether this crucial year will represent the victory of an emergent British social movement, or the successful implementation of a unique austerity programme forced onto a recalcitrant population.

²³ *The Independent*, "Blair's 'frenzied law making': a new offence for every day spent in office", 16 August 2006

²⁴ BBC, "Anti-terror tactics 'weaken law' ", 16 February 2009.

²⁵ See BBC, "UN criticises UK 'rendition role' ", 10 March 2009; *The Independent*, "Terrorist threat 'exploited to curb civil liberties' ", 17 February 2009.

²⁶ For just one of many examples, see Unison's Alternative Budget, not reported in the press: <http://falseeconomy.org.uk/files/unison-budget.pdf>.

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