The police are perpetrating harm, so why is the government giving them more power?

The police have abused their power, yet the government is giving them even more, writes Martha Spurrier

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This January, we learned that David Carrick, one of the most prolific sex offenders in UK history, was a serving police officer. He used his position to manipulate and abuse women, including a serving police officer, over a career spanning two decades. This is nothing new, we know Sarah Everard’s killer Wayne Couzens used his police badge and handcuffs to abduct her under false pretences before murdering her. Nor is it unusual, with the Metropolitan Police’s new chief, Mark Rowley, admitting that two to three serving officers will face court every week for a variety of offences, including domestic and sexual violence.

These crimes are not the only serious harms perpetuated on our communities by the police. From young black men and boys repeatedly subjected to traumatic stop-and-search and dehumanising strip searches, to the deaths of Chris Kaba, Oladeyi Omishore, and countless others at the hands of police—it is clear that for many people the police are not a source of safety but of violence and abuse of power. And yet, as more and more horrific revelations about the conduct of serving officers comes to light, far from stripping away the powers that make these abuses possible, the home secretary Suella Braverman is currently attempting to hand even greater powers to the police.

Last year, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (Policing) Act passed through parliament. It was an unprecedented attack on the right to protest, and a serious ramping up of police powers. The act created new offences, criminalised one-person protests, and gave the police new powers to impose restrictions on protests. However, owing to public outcry, parliamentarians rejected some of the act’s most draconian measures: new protest stop and search powers, including suspicion-less stop and search, new offences relating to “locking on” as a protest tactic, and orders to ban protests.

With the ink barely dry on the Policing Act, the government has introduced a new bill—the Public Order Bill—which contains, among other clampdowns on free expression, the very same measures that have only just been rejected. Now, it seems, the government is determined to push these measures through. To be clear: this bill represents an assault on everyone’s right to stand up for what they believe in, and would give sweeping new powers to a police force that has proved it can’t be trusted with them.

“Serious disruption prevention orders” are essentially court orders banning protests and can be handed down to protesters who haven’t committed a crime. These orders would see the right to protest completely removed and could result in those who don’t comply being electronically monitored 24/7.

Expansions of stop-and-search powers will allow police to search people and vehicles for any protest-related items, meaning you could be arrested for simply carrying a bike lock or a tube of glue. Even worse, suspicion-less stop-and-search powers are being extended—measures which we know are already routinely abused and disproportionately affect black and ethnic minority communities.

As stories of police abuse of power continue to break, as it is almost inevitable that they will, we are likely to hear a great deal about vetting, procedural reform, and rebuilding trust in policing. It’s evident that changes are needed to the way officers are recruited, trained, and dismissed. However, we must not be distracted from the fundamental problem with British policing: that the powers of the police are so broad that they will always be open to abuse.

It’s almost impossible to imagine any other profession in society surviving the number of scandals we’ve seen in police forces across the country. Time and time again, stories are breaking of police officers routinely using their positions to harm and abuse, and not only are they being allowed to keep the power they have, but they are given even more.

It’s not a radical view that giving police more powers will put more people at risk of harm, but it is a position we rarely hear from people in power. As the true scale of known police abuses mounts and the government endorses new laws to increase the scope of the police, anyone who values the safety of our communities must fight for the urgent rolling back of police powers.

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