

Government considers curfew powers following UK riots

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In the aftermath of the riots that swept London and other cities in England last week, the Conservative/Liberal government is actively planning the imposition of curfew powers covering wide geographical areas.

Home Secretary Theresa May announced that giving the police further powers to clear streets and establish “no-go” areas are under discussion.

“Under existing laws, there is no power to impose a general curfew in a particular area”, she said. While individuals can be subject to curfew conditions, “there are only limited powers to impose them on somebody under the age of 16. These are the sort of powers we are considering.”

She added, “I think we need to make sure the police have just got all the powers available to be able to use them as and when they are necessary.”

Since the 1973 repeal of the 18th-century Riot Act, there have been no specific powers available to a British government to impose a curfew on the public in a specific geographical area.

The powers proposed by May are in addition to the draconian Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which authorises curfews and bans on travel and assembly.

Such police state measures are being proposed as police forces continue to hunt down anyone accused of involvement in the disturbances. Nationally, more than 3,000 people have been arrested. In London, the Metropolitan Police have made 1,802 arrests with 1,032 people charged. Many have been sent to prison, often

for the pettiest of offences.

Despite the government’s official denial, it has emerged that a directive has been handed down to the judiciary to mete out the harshest possible sentences in riot-related cases. To this end, the rule book governing sentencing has been thrown out.

Even those not involved in any disturbances have been sent to prison for years. Jordan Blackshaw, 20, and Perry Sutcliffe-Keenan, 22, were given four years imprisonment each this week on the basis that they made Facebook postings, encouraging rioting.

In Manchester, Thomas Downey was imprisoned for 16 months for taking a box of doughnuts from a shop looted earlier by others.

Comparisons have been made in the media between this month’s disturbances and the riots in Brixton, London in 1981. In both instances, they were sparked by police brutality. In 1981, Cherry Groce was shot in a raid by police hunting for her son. The recent riots were triggered by the police killing of a 29-year-old father of four, Mark Duggan, in Tottenham, north London.

In the case of the Brixton riots, however, 82 arrests were made. Today, more than 20 times that number have been arrested in the capital alone, with estimates that this will rise to 3,000 people.

As a result of this unprecedented police dragnet, the prison population in England and Wales now stands at a record high of 86,654 and is increasing at a rate of more than 100 a day. The Ministry of Justice said that over the last week, there had been a rise of 723 in the prison population. On Friday, the Prison Governors Association said it was “managing an unprecedented situation” and “we are developing contingencies to increase useable capacity should further pressure be placed on the prison estate.”

The *Guardian* has published a breakdown of 1,000

riot-related cases that have come before the courts so far. The research, based on access to national court records, establishes that those convicted are being given sentences that are on average 25 percent longer than normal.

The newspaper notes, “More than half those imprisoned were charged with theft or handling stolen goods, receiving an average of 5.1 months. This is 25 percent longer than the average custodial sentence for these crimes of 4.1 months seen in courts during 2010”.

This flagrant breach of judicial norms is also seeing those convicted of public order offences being given sentences 33 percent longer than normal, and those convicted of assaulting police officers have been jailed for 40 percent longer than usual.

The figures show that magistrates’ courts are sentencing many people to immediate prison terms. Some 56 defendants of the 80 who have already been sentenced by magistrates were sent to jail. This equates to a rate of 70 percent and compares with the usual imprisonment rate at magistrates courts of 2 percent.

The average prison sentence given by magistrates’ courts is four months. This is set to increase markedly as the data also reveals that a huge number of defendants, 70 percent, have been remanded in custody to await crown court trial, in which sentences of up to ten years can be given for the offence of riot.

The courts imposing these draconian sentences are carrying out the most blatant class justice. Among the most significant findings in the research is the fact that the overwhelming number of those dragged before the courts are young, working class, unemployed males.

The data reveals that 66 percent of those who have appeared in court are aged under 25 and 17 percent are aged between 11 and 17. More than 90 percent of those appearing are male. In London, the Metropolitan Police said that around half of the people in court in riot-related cases are under the age of 18. In cases where the age of the defendant is known, the Ministry of Defence has also reported that 17 percent are below 18 years of age.

The *Guardian* cited the study of Liverpool University urban planning lecturer Alex Singleton, who in analysing the court records found that the majority of people appearing before magistrates “live in poor neighbourhoods, with 41 percent of suspects living in one of the top 10 percent of most deprived places in the

country.”

It is also no coincidence that the data establishes that “66 of the neighbourhoods where the accused live got poorer between 2007 and 2010”. This correlates precisely with the 2007/08 global financial crisis and the resultant deep recession in Britain. As the banks in Britain were bailed out to the tune of more than a trillion pounds, the then Labour government began a series of public spending cuts and freezes, which have now been escalated by the Conservative-led government.

The government is also pressing ahead with plans to evict families from social housing if anyone living there is convicted in relation to the riots.

On Friday, Housing minister Grant Shapps proposed legislation that would allow those convicted to lose their homes in London, no matter where a so-called “crime” was committed. Under current legislation, local boroughs in the capital can only evict a person if a crime is committed in the borough where they live.

Shapps told the *Evening Standard* that he proposed changing the law so that, “Neighbours from hell who become visitors from hell should not be able to escape through some loophole in the law”. He added, “If you committed a crime in south London but happen to live in north London, you should still be exposed to losing your home.”

The moves by local councils to begin removing social housing benefits from those accused of involvement in rioting has already resulted in notices being served to evict families.

This week the threat of eviction resulted in a mother, Della Collins, being unable to offer her council property as an address for her 19-year old son who has been charged in court. Della, who lives in west London, denounced the government, stating, “It’s not fair for them to take my house away. I have other children to look after. If I lose the house, I lose everything. I wasn’t involved in any of this—it has nothing to do with me. The government does not give a damn about people like us—nobody does.”



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