

# The political issues raised by the media ban on UK far-right leader Tommy Robinson

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UK far-right leader Tommy Robinson has been banned from a growing list of social media outlets.

Last week, Amazon blocked the sale of Robinson's Islamophobic diatribe on the Quran, co-authored with another far-right figure, Peter McLoughlin. In February, he was permanently banned from Facebook and Instagram, following a Twitter ban in March 2018 and a PayPal ban in November 2018. YouTube suspended advertising on his account this January and is under pressure to bar his account.

There is a widespread feeling of disgust towards Robinson and what he represents and a wholly justified wish that his views are driven out of British politics. But it would be dangerously wrong to believe that this task can be entrusted to the multibillionaire CEOs of the world's largest big-tech companies.

Where Robinson's actions are criminal, they should be tried in a court of law. To have him barred from public platforms is a further step towards a regime of political censorship that will always be aimed against the working class and the left.

The actions against Robinson also have little practical effect on his fascist campaigning. Whereas freedom of speech and political organisation are fundamental to the political development of the disenfranchised working class, the far-right can rely on super-rich sponsors and the de facto support of the state. The main impact of Robinson's various bans has therefore been to raise his already artificially inflated political profile.

Following his Facebook ban, Robinson announced on his remaining YouTube channel that he was expecting the move and was in the process of setting up a dedicated news channel that more than 100,000 people had already pledged to subscribe to. Facebook's ban on him saw his YouTube subscribers soar to over 370,000.

Since May 2018, he has been at the centre of a well-reported and financially lucrative court case over his attempts to prejudice a jury in a child sex grooming trial in Leeds. His original conviction was quashed on a technicality. At the retrial in October 2018, inexplicably, the

judge recommended the case be referred to the Attorney General on receiving a statement from Robinson, leaving him free to go. Only now has the Attorney General set a new date for the retrial, on March 22.

At each stage of the proceedings, Robinson has been able to speak to a battery of media cameras and microphones.

Last summer, a series of "Free Tommy" marches through central London were attended by thousands of far-right supporters. Protesters climbed on the railings of Downing Street, hurled abuse at passersby and assaulted counter-demonstrators—acts that would have provoked a vicious response from the police if carried out during a left-wing protest.

These marches provided the backdrop to a huge fundraising and right-wing solidarity campaign.

Robinson said he received more than £350,000 in donations in just two weeks. At least £47,000 of this came from the right-wing Middle East Forum in the United States. This is only the tip of the financial iceberg of Robinson's global funding operation. Last Sunday, the *Times* revealed that the former English Defence League leader is now the best-funded politician in the UK. In 2016 and 2017, he received between £5,000 and £8,000 a month from the far-right Rebel Media website, which gave him £48,000 to set up a TV studio. Robinson boasts of "a pot in excess of a few hundred thousand pounds." He lives in a £1 million gated, six-bedroom home and took three holidays last year.

Trump's fascistic former advisor Steve Bannon intervened to publicly champion Robinson's cause, and Republican lawmakers invited him to speak at the US Congress. Robinson is now a special advisor to the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and has posed for pictures with recruits to the British Army.

A BBC *Panorama* documentary was recently commissioned into Robinson and was the basis for a 4,000-strong fascist protest organised outside the broadcaster's northern office in Salford this February. Robinson was able to erect a huge screen outside the BBC's HQ on which he screened his own counter "documentary."

Due to the non-stop publicity afforded Robinson, his video has already been viewed by nearly 1.5 million people on YouTube.

This immense publicity and financial backing make a mockery of the despicable attempts to portray Robinson as a persecuted anti-establishment innocent. As ever, *Spiked*, *Spectator* and *Telegraph* writer Brendan O'Neill led the way, publishing, "Why Tommy Robinson should not be banned," in which he attacks the left for cheering the "silencing of an awkward public voice...a public figure, someone who commands an audience and enjoys political influence." This from the website that routinely attacks WikiLeaks founder and genuine free speech hero, Julian Assange.

*Spiked*'s claimed concern for democratic rights invariably manifests itself when it is a question of ensuring the hated right wing's ability to speak unchallenged. Other "persecuted" figures named in O'Neill's article include far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, far-right poster boy Milo Yiannopoulos and "leading UKIP activists."

Robinson is no free-speech martyr. He has carried out multiple potentially criminal acts in the last year alone, including intimidating serious journalists. During the night of March 4, Robinson turned up at the house of Mike Stuchbury, the journalist and historian of the far right, and banged repeatedly on the windows and doors demanding to speak with him. Livestreaming these events to his supporters, Robinson revealed Stuchbury's home address and threatened to do the same to other journalists. "I'm going to make a documentary that exposes every single one of you, every single detail about every one of you. Where you live, where you work, everything about you is going to be exposed."

Robinson left after the police were called, only to return at 5 o'clock in the morning. Journalists across the political spectrum signed a letter of protest at how "far-right organisations [are] trying to silence reports of their activities."

He is also facing possible libel charges for lying claims against a 15-year-old Syrian refugee attacked in his school last December. The boy was pushed to the ground by another pupil and had water poured over his face, mimicking the 'waterboarding' method of torture. Just hours after the story began circulating, Robinson claimed that the Syrian boy had previously attacked three girls and a boy at the school.

Robinson's brief imprisonment and pending retrial for contempt of court are the result of his verbally attacking defendants of Asian appearance as they entered court, in view of jurors who had retired to consider their verdict.

While Robinson carries out these acts, the censorship

measures deployed ineffectually against him are being prepared for use against the left. Facebook, along with Google, have been engaged in the blacklisting of left-wing websites since 2017, under the fraudulent pretext of combating "fake news" and "extremism." The World Socialist Web Site suffered a particularly serious decline in hits following Google's introduction of new search algorithms and Facebook's employment of thousands of people, effectively as censors. These measures will only become more severe as the class struggle intensifies.

The ruling class is engaged in a ferocious campaign to outlaw all forms of left-wing sentiment. Hate speech, the legal basis on which Robinson has received his bans, is being redefined to criminalise principled opposition to right-wing politics. For questioning the anti-Jeremy Corbyn manoeuvres of former Labour MP Luciana Berger—who has since joined a breakaway group with former Conservative MPs—the Wavertree Constituency Labour Party was accused of "bullying," "misogyny" and "anti-Semitism."

Deputy Labour leader Tom Watson, who has been at the forefront of witch-hunts in his party, is also leading the calls for YouTube to ban Robinson "as a matter of utmost urgency." He considers this a shining example of how to proceed against the mass Labour party membership, now being talked about in the same terms as a former member of the British National Party and the English Defence League.

Robinson and his supporters must be decisively defeated. But the far-right cannot be fought by handing weapons to the same ruling elite that encourages its development. Historical and contemporary experience proves that it is only the working class, organised internationally in a struggle for socialism, that can confront the fascist threat. For this social force to develop its full strength, fundamental democratic rights must be defended—not through appeals to the ruling class but in a struggle against it and its far-right props.



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