

[Stop this authoritarian knee-jerk](#) [1]

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At times when unrest is widespread, civil liberties tend to be neglected. If the primary function of the state is to protect its citizens from attack, then basic liberty is most at stake when there is no security of persons or property. But what measures should be resorted to in order to keep the peace? The knee-jerk authoritarians immediately latched onto the ideas of using rubber bullets, bringing in the army, and even imposing curfews. It may well be that all three of these measures could have returned order in the short term, but at what cost?

Fortunately, all three proposals proved unnecessary when the police were finally deployed in full force: London has seen minimal violence since Tuesday, and the spread to the West Midlands and Manchester seems to have been contained. At the same time, communities had a chance to recover and organise themselves, with resident patrols most noticeably in Enfield, and touching scenes of Sikh and Muslim solidarity as they pledged to guard each others' neighbourhoods in Birmingham.

But imagine the authoritarians had had their way. The use of rubber bullets or water cannon could have caused an escalation of violence, suddenly focusing attention on attacking and targeting authority itself rather than the sporadic and spontaneous opportunism we have seen so far. Likewise, the use of the army would have been a huge admittance of systemic police failure, causing us to seriously re-examine the use and necessity of the police force as we know it. This may have been a good thing if institutional change were needed, but calling it into question at a time of crisis could only have caused further uncertainty.

The use of curfews would have been a severe restriction of the freedoms of all citizens, adversely affecting everyone instead of targeting and deterring criminals. It is astounding that it was considered seriously at all, even without all of the additional impracticalities of enforcement and exemption for special cases. Lastly, it is also worth remembering the old adage that there is nothing so permanent as a temporary state policy: you curtail civil liberties for immediate security at the peril of never regaining them. The lesson from this week was that the restoration of order merely required better enforcement of existing procedures, rather than the accrual of extra state power at the expense of our liberty.

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