

Editorial

Challenging authoritarian political cultures

The late summer and autumn of 2025 saw mass arrests during non-violent Palestine solidarity protests in cities such as London and Liverpool. The proscription of Palestine Action as a ‘terrorist organisation’, in response to its sustained nonviolent direct action against the direct links between UK-based arms manufacturers and the genocide in Gaza, has resulted in protesters being targeted for simply holding signs saying ‘I Support Palestine Action’. This repression of peaceful protest has disproportionately impacted on older activists and has been accompanied by an intense vilification of solidarity action. Shabana Mahmood and Keir Starmer have sought to construct Palestine solidarity protests as ‘unBritish’, and have brought in new restrictions on what is being termed ‘repeated protests’.¹

The same period saw a significant surge in far-right activity. Violent protests and intimidation targeted hotels housing migrants and refugees, and there were clashes with both counter-protesters and police. In London in September 2025, the ‘Unite the Kingdom’ rally associated with Tommy Robinson attracted between 110,000 and 150,000 people, which is the largest far-right march in a generation. These events have taken place in relation to a political context where far-right rhetoric against trans rights and people of colour has been ‘mainstreamed’ in different ways. Thus Keir Starmer’s ‘Island of Strangers’ speech in May 2025 mobilised the rhetoric of ‘taking back control’ - a discourse which is associated with Reform and the far right.

The speech served to shift the terms of debate on race and migration further rightwards on migration, positioning migration as a threat to (white) Britishness. Starmer’s demand that migrants should learn ‘our language’ not only reinforces and entrenches existing narratives and practices of division; it also projects a spurious

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homogeneity within the UK.² Such framing ignores important geographical and social differences relating to language within the devolved parts of the UK; and it effaces the importance of diverse languages to forms of multiculturalism often concentrated among working-class communities - despite the frequent mobilisation of the term 'white working class'.³

Equally, the relationship of repressive policies to the uneven geographies of the UK is often conveniently ignored. In the debates following David Lammy's recent attack on the right to jury trials, the massive injustices caused by the use of Diplock and non-jury courts during 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland have largely been absent. This lack of memory is symptomatic of the significant silences surrounding the long history of Britain's past authoritarian state practices.

The repression of supporters of Palestine Action has seen the most significant number of arrests of peaceful protesters since the Committee of 100 anti-nuclear protests in the early 1960s, but the policing of far-right and fascist activity has been more lenient. It is also notable that technologies such as facial recognition have generally not been used against far-right mobilisations. This is significant given the levels of violence, criminality and intimidation involved in the hotel 'protests'.

The far right have also invoked the well-worn trope of protecting 'women and children' from racialised minority men inaccurately framed as uniquely misogynistic, and this is mirrored in their presentations of trans people as a threat to women and girls. Yet the strong representation of domestic abusers within recent far-right mobilisations was strikingly evident among those convicted for offences during the riots of summer 2024. Nevertheless, though knee-jerk 'lock them up' arguments against the far right are superficially attractive, they are also worth resisting, given they serve only to reinforce authoritarian logics. The point here is about differential treatment.

This disproportionality is part of a longer history of the left being targeted by intrusive and repressive policing - as indicated, for example, by the revelations about the conduct of Spycops that first came to light in 2011, but have become increasingly prominent during the course of the ongoing Undercover Policing Inquiry. Current policing marks an escalation of earlier authoritarian clampdowns on environmental protests - which go back at least as far as the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994, but have been reinvigorated in recent years, as seen in the Tories' hardline response to the actions of organisations such as Just Stop Oil.

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This special issue of *Soundings* engages with some of the issues raised by these intensifying and uneven authoritarian state practices, which are being entrenched and extended during the Labour Party's current term in office. Co-edited by Dave Featherstone from the *Soundings* editorial collective, together with Ewan Gibbs and Jenny Morrison, this issue considers what is at stake in relation to these authoritarian state practices, how they build on longer histories of racialised and colonial state formation, and how they map on to the contested spatial politics of the UK. The issue also charts some of the alternatives being shaped in relation to authoritarian political cultures, and outlines some of their tensions and possibilities. This builds on previous work in *Soundings* - and beyond - that has considered the significance of different aspects of authoritarian state practices - and resistance to them.

This work includes Jasbinder S. Nijjar's reflections on the importance of Southall Resists 40, which memorialised the killing of the anti-racist activist Blair Peach and others involved in resisting the National Front in the 1970s. As Nijjar argues, this was a 'powerful expression of community resistance against racialised and militarised policing, combining radical and public history'.⁴ Histories such as these have contributed to the increasing recognition of the racialised and colonial nature of the foundations of the UK state, as was highlighted during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Kirsten Forkert's recent interview with Kevin Blowe of NetPol drew attention to Starmer's long-standing connection to this authoritarian legacy, including in relation to his position as DPP during the 2010 riots.⁵ These interventions emphasise the importance of locating current authoritarian practices and dispositions in relation to longer histories - as well as highlighting the equally long-standing ways in which they have been challenged and brought into contestation.

The authoritarian legacies of empire

The first two articles in this issue make a further contribution to an understanding of these longer racialised and colonial histories, and of the formation of the UK 'secret' state. And they also note the importance of contesting and making visible these histories and their unfinished legacies. Ibtehal Hussain's article engages in depth with relations between cultures of secrecy, the colonial state and dominant articulations of Britishness. Her intervention also challenges the way in which 'authoritarianism' is so frequently othered - defined as 'foreign', and the converse of Britishness.

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Hussain also draws attention to some of the significant legacies of colonial secrecy - including the articulations of the past with the present, and the unfinished nature of so many of these legacies. Ben Gowland develops this theme in his article on the Information Research Department (IRD) - the secret counter-information unit of the UK foreign office which existed between 1948 and 1977, and played a key role in destabilising Nkrumah's post-independence administration in Ghana. As Gowland comments, 'the historical and political trajectories that led to the current conjuncture are, in some ways, routed through Ghana and the IRD offices in Whitehall in the early 1960s'. Gowland also draws attention to ongoing interventions of a similar nature by contemporary British governments, such as the 2019 'This is Woke' scheme, an under-cover platform that was used 'to target young British Muslims, amongst others, as part of the British government's Prevent counter-radicalisation strategy'.

As Hussain comments, it is notable that, rather than offering a long overdue reckoning with the Labour Party's long-standing relation to colonialism, racism and authoritarian state practices, David Lammy and Keir Starmer have doubled down on them. They have done this in part by positioning their political project squarely in relation to the figure of Ernest Bevin, Labour's post-Second World War Foreign Secretary, while being conspicuously silent on his enthusiastic support for 'the Empire'.⁶ They have also ignored the assessment by senior Conservatives politicians such as Winston Churchill that Bevin's foreign policy was pretty much identical to their own.

As John Saville noted in the 1967 edition of *Socialist Register*: 'In Greece and Palestine, and in a hundred and one corners of the world where the British Empire continued its usual bloody if tattered existence, Bevin was to be found pursuing straight Tory policies.'⁷ As this demonstrates, the current Labour position is not an aberration, it is part of a longer history and legacy. The Callaghan and Wilson Labour governments also attacked trade unions and progressive social forces in a number of ways. There is a need to consider this history, and to look at some of the different imaginaries and practices through which authoritarian logics have been understood and contested.

In his reflections on Tate Britain's recent exhibition 'The 80s: Photographing Britain', Ashwani Sharma - noting that the 1980s were a decade when 'authoritarian populism, Thatcher's hard state, the policing of dissent, and the demonisation of

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Black youth, were countered by visible and militant resistance’, comments that ‘today we face what feels like a similar slide toward authoritarianism, but one marked by fragmentation and often by the absence of sustained counter power’. This points to some key theoretical and political questions about how to make sense of the different ways in which authoritarian political logics and practices are being articulated in the present conjuncture - as well as the need to consider the distinctive features of the contemporary political and cultural landscape alongside those of the late twentieth century, particularly in terms of labour and social movement organisation, the shifting economic base of British capitalism, and the different challenges it currently faces.

The political style and interventions of figures such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage have been productively theorised and understood by authors such as John Clarke using Stuart Hall’s framing of ‘authoritarian populism’.⁸ The current Labour government, however, does not articulate authoritarian modes of politics within a populist register (though Starmer has deep-rooted authoritarian political style and convictions). Rather, it is normalising and entrenching an authoritarian political culture across a range of interlocking issues, and in frequently racialised and gendered ways. These have typically been shaped by technocratic modes of governance and reasoning.

The current Labour leadership’s concerted attacks on protest, its linked focus on rearmament and militarism, and the silencing of internal dissent within the Labour Party, are central to this approach. These positions are held to serve economic as well as political ends, holding out prospects for ‘reindustrialisation’ in regions still suffering from the long-term effects of factory closures in the second half of the twentieth century. At the same time, rearmament as an industrial strategy (founded though it may be on dubious assumptions and choices) helps to reinforce a nationalist logic that articulates and ties together the interests of organised labour, big business and government. The banning of Palestine Action after activists targeted military plants underlines some of the ways in which these areas of industrial and foreign policy intersect with rising authoritarianism and the undermining of civil liberties.

Underpinned by a geography of accommodation rather than opposition to Trumpism and the transnational rise of the far right, these authoritarian elements are clearly shaped in relation to a broader conjuncture in which authoritarian politics

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is ascendant. Emblematic of these broader connections are the flags that have been used to intimidate minorities, and to shape the political upsurge of the far right to a broader set of agendas and causes. In towns and cities across the UK, the 'raise the colours' campaign has created a powerful visible presence for a far right whose partisans are often comparatively atomised, having been drawn to the movement through social media.

At far-right protests, the display of anti-trans banners and Israeli flags, as well as references to Charlie Kirk and the US flag, have combined to create an intimidating presence linked to its transnational presence. And this far-right politics is also being shaped in relation both to hostility to difference within the UK - as seen in the rhetoric of the 'Unite the Nation' rally - and in attempts in the devolved nations to claim the Scottish Saltire and the Welsh dragon, and at times in the Irish context the tricolour too. The far right draws on the ways flags have long been used to intimidate in the North of Ireland - they are now a regular feature of fascist mobilisations against hotels housing asylum seekers. As the Institute of Race Relations have argued: 'Enforcing Britishness, or Scottishness or Englishness, is a form of bordering - marking an internal racist frontier, the frontier between "us" and "them"'.⁹

Experiences of devolution and alternative perspectives

These protests highlight the need to consider some of the alternative agendas being shaped in relation to the devolved settlement in Scotland, Wales and the North of Ireland, as well as some of the significant critiques of the devolved administrations in terms of left strategies and horizons. In a recent discussion of the Caerphilly by-election, Gareth Leaman described Welsh Labour as 'the ultimate middle managers', and quoted a description of the Senedd as the ultimate institution of passive mediation between capital, state and public.¹⁰ A similar argument could be applied to Scotland: while the SNP looks likely to return to Holyrood as the largest party in the upcoming 2026 Scottish elections, this seems more a result of abhorrence at Labour's record in Westminster than of any enthusiasm for the nationalists. The SNP have done little to counter the rise of authoritarian practices, with SNP MPs in Westminster abstaining on the vote to proscribe Palestine Action.

Former First Minister Humza Yousaf has been a lone voice from the Scottish governing party in calling for the exemption of peaceful protestors backing

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Palestine Action from prosecution - a call that was rejected by the Solicitor General for Scotland on behalf of the Lord Advocate.¹¹ Police Scotland have widely implemented the proscription, infamously arresting screenwriter Paul Laverty for wearing a T-shirt stating 'Genocide in Palestine, time to take Action'. Such muted reaction to the erosion of democratic rights perhaps reflects Foley, Montgomery and Kerr's argument that the SNP has governed through a 'strategic depoliticisation'.¹² John Swinney's support for the use of Wick airport during the US seizure of a ship re-flagged as Russian coming from the Venezuelan blockade further emphasises the Scottish government's concessions to Trumpism, despite its occasionally more critical rhetoric.¹³

There have been some elements of shared progressive agendas across these spaces. Attempts at shared action in terms of Palestine solidarity, for example, have been shaped between the SDLP, Plaid Cymru, SNP, Sinn Fein, Alliance, Scottish Liberal Democrats, Scottish Greens and People before Profit, who worked together to push for a recall of parliament in late August 2025 to discuss 'the deteriorating situation in Gaza'.¹⁴ But the alliance is limited, and is currently under significant attack. As Neil Evans warns with regard to Wales in his article for this issue, while a commitment to an inclusive nationalism 'remains a vital part of government policy' and is supported by 'important parts of civil society', it faces many challenges.

As Evans notes, 'Current projections for the 2026 Senedd elections suggest significant wins for Reform', in which case 'the Welsh construction of race and nation will be in peril'. Similarly, a recent Survation poll has Reform on course to be the second largest party and main opposition in the next Scottish Parliament.¹⁵ The strength of the challenge posed by Reform in Wales and Scotland indicates the disabling nature of some of the assumptions about their 'progressive' or 'exceptional' national character, in terms of recognising significant challenges around racism and the far right, as Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever have argued.¹⁶

In the Caerphilly by-election of October 2025, a hitherto safe Labour Senedd seat was won by Plaid Cymru in face of a strong challenge by Reform. This highlights some of the dangers identified by Evans, as well as some of the terms on which these issues are being contested/negotiated. Parts of the political discourse of Plaid during the by-election were different from those of Starmer's UK Labour. For example, Plaid leader Rhun ap Iorwerth was 'unequivocal in his rejection' of attacks on migrants,

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stating that ‘the real problem isn’t immigration, but the government’s refusal to properly target billionaires’.¹⁷ It is notable, however, that Rhun Ap Iorweth and other Plaid Cymru and Labour politicians were reticent about making a strong defence of the progressive elements of devolution, such as Wales’s ‘nation of sanctuary’ status, when they were under attack from Reform.

Rather than mounting a consistent defence of the commitment to welcome asylum seekers, there was an explicit distancing of support beyond the case of Ukrainian refugees. At the main BBC hustings, Reform candidate Llŷr Powel (referred to derisively as ‘Welsh Dave’ by Farage) was more powerfully confronted by audience member Alice Vyas and her son Cole Vyas than he was by any of the opposition candidates. Speaking of how, as someone in a mixed race relationship, ‘she’d never felt more uncomfortable’ in the town, Vyas directly called out the impact of Reform in intensifying racialised tension in Caerphilly.¹⁸ The byelection also signalled the importance of civil society and trade unions for anti-racism campaigning: such organising beyond parties, which is often ignored or downplayed, was of crucial significance.

As Neil Evans argues, the role of civil society is of particular significance in devolved contexts, and there are spaces of possibility here. Writing with Charlotte Williams, Evans has argued that ‘mobilisation from below’ means that ‘grass roots groups are now more equipped and empowered to engage in the broad participatory democracy of Wales’;¹⁹ and this makes engaging with diverse communities all the more important. Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever have argued for the importance not only of recognising ‘the ethnic diversity of Scotland’s working class’, but also of efforts ‘to actively build more concrete alliances and coalitions with those civil society organisations created by black and brown Scots and migrant communities’.²⁰ This is all the more crucial given that the last year has seen a rise in far-right protest across Scotland, in a further challenge to the assumption prevalent in recent decades that Scotland is somewhat inoculated against the extremes of racism found in England.

The SNP has little to offer as opposition to the rise of the far right in Scotland, as seen when, in April 2025, current First Minister John Swinney called a cross-party forum on the growth of the far right. The forum exemplified some of the limits of the terms on which the far right is being contested - and the limited alternatives being shaped by devolved administrations. The forum made an explicit appeal

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to the values of 'civic Scotland' - as embodied in the elite coalition of civic and political leaders which was once credited with delivering the Scottish parliament, but has since devolution lost its power, influence and mobilising capacity. Widely lampooned as a damp squib, the forum also failed to recognise that, after twenty-five years of devolution, and with the SNP approaching two decades in power, the party cannot claim to represent an insurgent hope. Rather, such forums risk further embedding the perception intentionally generated by Reform that they are the anti-establishment alternative to the out-of-touch governing elite.

This makes it all the more necessary to think about some of the broader alternatives being shaped in relation to devolved contexts, and beyond the limits of these elite spaces. Such questions are discussed in the interventions in this issue by Fiona Duncan and Rosie Hampton, each of whom reflects on some of the ways in which the relations between civil society and government in Scotland are being negotiated. Drawing on research into the experiences of workers in the Third Sector in Glasgow, and her own experience of working in the sector, Duncan discusses its dynamics, including some of the tensions, difficulties and pressures of negotiating funding in an ongoing context of austerity. She also draws attention to the different pressures on third sector workers themselves.

As she notes, 'These encounters reflect not only how socio-political forces shape how people move and interact through third sector spaces, entangled in and restricted by a web of structural issues, but also how deeply these are felt and experienced by third sector workers.' In a related vein, Rosie Hampton draws on her engagement with Friends of the Earth Scotland and the tenants' union Living Rent to bring attention to some of the spaces opened up by devolution for civil society engagement. Her discussion of the Scottish government's wavering commitment to a Just Transition signals some of the limits here.

Arguing that there are often close linkages and conversations between NGOs and government, Hampton argues: 'We don't necessarily care about being in there, but we want those who are there to be saying the right things and we want them to recognise when Just Transition is being used as a platitude rather than meaningfully.' She also refers to some of the pervasive influences of authoritarian political cultures on everyday contexts: Friends of the Earth Scotland has noted, for example, 'an increased police presence when we are campaigning', including during 'less confrontational activities'.

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The contributions from Duncan and Hampton, however, emphasise that the current intersections of authoritarianism and austerity are not inevitable. And, as Hussain argues, the increasing reckoning with some of the racist and colonial foundations of the UK state can be generative. In discussing the Unredacted public web archive, which ‘documents secretive UK national security practices’, and contains over ten thousand documents, she notes that, ‘when used with caution and an acknowledgement of its limitations’, it can contribute to methods ‘that critically expose the fragility of UK national security practices as well as the secrecy/means of revelation these practices are entangled in’.²¹ ‘In similar terms this special issue speaks to an attempt to open up critical interventions in the many dimensions of both the authoritarian spaces of the UK state and of attempts to bring them into contestation.’

Dave Featherstone, Ewan Gibbs and Jenny Morrison

Dave Featherstone is Professor of Political Geography at the University of Glasgow and is a member of the Soundings Editorial Collective. He has interests in the uneven geographies of authoritarian political cultures and in the contested relations between trade unions and authoritarianism.

Ewan Gibbs is Senior Lecturer in Economic and Social History at the University of Glasgow. His research focuses on energy, industry, work and labour in Scotland and Britain in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Jenny Morrison is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Glasgow. Her research focuses on feminism, social reproduction and the Scottish state before and after devolution.

This issue also includes articles that are not part of the main theme of authoritarianism and alternatives.

In his review article of Daniel Susskind’s *Growth: A Reckoning*, **David Purdy** explores whether there are ways of resolving the conflict between the lure of growth and the price we pay for it.

Carl Rowlands argues the need for revising some of the prevailing narratives surrounding the growth of electronics and computing power in the UK. Noting the lack of political and social mechanisms for mediating the impacts of technology, he

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argues for a more assertive conception of the public good, and for finding ways to realign the tech workforce so that it interacts with a public sphere.

Nancy Geddes-O'Dolan discusses the proliferation of podcasts fronted by members of the political elite during the 2024 UK election, as senior figures from across the party political spectrum took up cosy careers in podcasting, alongside their newfound political 'frenemies'. Through a thematic analysis of the tone, narrative and framings of these podcasts, she shows that their effect is to reinforce a framing of electoral politics as barely ideological - or even 'political'.

Finally, **Bill Schwarz** remembers **Phil Cohen**, a long-term contributor to *Soundings* and friend of the journal.

Notes

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2. Eleanor Chapman 'Revocalising human geography: Decolonial language geographies beyond the nation-state', *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol 47 No 1, 2023, pp24-42.
3. A. Singh, S. Valluvan, and J. Kneale, 'A pub for England: Race and class in the time of the nation', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 28 No 1, pp156-176.
4. Jasbinder S. Nijjar, 'Resisting racial police warfare through radical history', *Soundings* 87, 2024.
5. Kirsten Forkert interviews Kevin Blowe, 'Law and order: what can we expect from an incoming Labour government?' *Soundings* 86, 2024, pp136-148.
6. David Lammy, *Guardian*, 8 January 2025: 'Migrant exploitation is a progressive issue. That's why we will now take the toughest steps ever to stop it, David Lammy, The Guardian; Keir Starmer, *Guardian*, 10.feb 2022: Under my leadership, Labour's commitment to Nato is unshakable, Keir Starmer, The Guardian.
7. John Saville, 'Labourism and the Labour Government', *Socialist Register*, R. Miliband and J. Saville (eds), Merlin Press, 1967, pp43-71, p52. These arguments are developed in more detail in Saville's *Politics of Continuity: British Foreign Policy and the Labour Government, 1945-6*, Verso, 1993.
8. See Stuart Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, Verso 1988; John Clarke, 'Building the Boris Bloc', *Soundings* 74, 2020.
9. IRR, 13 November 2025: Enforcing Britishness: from the 'numbers game' to far-right vigilantism - Institute of Race Relations.

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10. See Gareth Leaman, 'Detoxifying Welsh Labour': <https://newsocialist.org.uk/detoxifying-welsh-labour/>; for Welsh Devolution as passive revolution see <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/106444/>; see also <https://novaramedia.com/2025/10/24/plaid-cymrus-caerphilly-victory-matters-in-every-constituency-not-just-in-wales/>; and Daniel Evans, Kieron Smith and Huw Williams, *The Welsh Way: Essays on Neoliberalism and Devolution*, Parthian, 2021. For a more positive account see Nick Davies and Darren Williams, *Clear Red Water: Welsh Devolution and Socialist Politics*, Francis and Taylor Publishers, 2009.
11. BBC, 1 September 2025: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cedvqvp3q9qo>.
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13. BBC, 8 January 2026: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c98j1l01p96o>.
14. Plaid Cymru, 23 August 2025: Plaid Cymru support cross-party calls for immediate Gaza Parliament recall - The Party of Wales.
15. *Herald*, 26 October 2025: <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/25571317.new-poll-poll-shows-reform-uk-overtaking-labour-scotland/>.
16. Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever, *Britain in Fragments: Why Things Are Falling Apart*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
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20. Virdee and McGeever, *Britain in Fragments*, p137.
21. See Unredacted Website: <https://unredacted.uk/>