

Peaceful Protest around Parliament:

Following the 'No More Fallujahs' peace camp last October, a second camp has been held in Parliament Square, this time to remind the new Prime Minister that 'War is Still the Issue'.



Parliament Square Peace Camp, October 2006

In Issue 19, we reported on the Parliament Square Peace Camp and related action outside Downing Street, both part of the 'No More Fallujahs' weekend of action. Extracts from this report give the background:

'On 8 Nov 2004, after more than two months of aerial attacks, the US - with British support - began its second major assault on Fallujah, devastating it and killing hundreds of civilians. UK forces supported the attack, with hundreds of troops redeployed to form part of a 'ring of steel' around the city. The scale of the attack - and its effect on civilians - was unprecedented in the bloody history of the invasion and occupation, yet the crimes committed in Fallujah received little attention here and have quickly been forgotten.'
(www.rememberfallujah.org)

'No More Fallujahs' was a programme of three days of nonviolent civil disobedience in and around London to mark the second anniversary of the 2004 attack. The action called for an immediate end to the US/UK military occupation of Iraq, for reparations and debt cancellation to allow the Iraqi people to rebuild their country, and for the prosecution of all those responsible for war crimes in Iraq.

Organisers of the weekend, the London Mass Action Group, did not seek authorisation for the camp, nor was authorisation sought for the 'Naming the Dead' ceremony, in defiance of the widely criticised and discredited Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005, (SOCPA) which does not permit unauthorised demonstrations within 1 km of Parliament. As a result, those events which took place within this area during the weekend rendered all participants liable to prosecution under the Act.

On Monday morning, in a continuation of the remembrance ceremony which had been so rudely disrupted by police a year before, leading to the convictions of Maya Evans and Milan Rai under SOCPA, I joined Mil and Maya outside Downing Street where, along with others from the camp, we read out the names of Iraqi civilians and British soldiers who had been killed in Iraq.

As the group entered the cordoned-off area, the police tried to hand out more warning leaflets and then gave everyone ten minutes to reconsider their position. The name reading began at 9am - one name every 30 seconds - Iraqi people and British soldiers. So many lives lost. So little time spent remembering the things our government would have us forget. Ten minutes passed, then half an hour, then an hour. The name reading continued as the police looked on. No attempt was made to stop the event.

War is Still the Issue

This second peace camp was timed (23-28 June) to coincide with the inauguration of Gordon Brown as Prime Minister. At the time of writing, the camp is ongoing.

The peace camp leaflet outlines the aims of the action: *Brown will have a choice to make. Will he be Tweedledum to Blair's Tweedledee, or will he transform the Labour agenda from pro-war to pro-peace? ...We need to stop Brown from choosing business as usual: more war, more terror, more nukes and more restrictions on civil liberties.*

At the previous camp, the police had handed out leaflets explaining why it was an offence under SOCPA to be taking part. This time, they made a mystifying claim to the press that a five-day peace camp in Parliament Square is lawful, although the action clearly breaches SOCPA regulations and was advertised as an unauthorised demonstration.

This alleged lawfulness didn't stop the police, who had more or less ignored the peace campers for four days, from raiding and searching all the tents in the square on the day of Brown's succession to the prime ministerial throne. At the time of writing, it is unclear on what grounds these searches were made.

A number of spurious arrests were also made during the day, including one where, according to witnesses, a police inspector attacked a peaceful demonstrator, then arrested him for unauthorised protest, and another, where Steve Jago, one of Brian Haw's regular supporters who must be known to all local police officers, was arrested for refusing to give his name and address after being asked for it because of his 'anti-social behaviour' of peacefully displaying a banner outside the gates of Parliament.

www.warisstilltheissue.org

A Serious Organised Crime?

by Genny Bove

WPJF campaigner is charged under the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005

Six months after being reported under SOCPA at the No More Fallujahs weekend, I received a summons to go to court for taking part in this unauthorised demonstration. It took the Crown Prosecution Service half a year to decide that it was in the public interest to prosecute under SOCPA, but now they have, and I've got a provisional court date of 14 September. At least ten others were charged at the same time and Milan Rai and Maya Evans have already been convicted of both organising and taking part in the demonstration.

I'm planning to plead not guilty because I cannot accept that it is a criminal offence (serious organised criminal offence, even) to remember the British soldiers who have died in Iraq by reading out their names in a solemn remembrance ceremony, even if I choose to do that outside Downing Street without asking for police permission. If permission is sought, the police can set restrictions on the time, place and duration of any demonstration, the size of the banners and the number of people who may take part.

I believe it is crucial to challenge the ongoing erosion of our civil liberties. When laws such as this are introduced, there is always a justification linked with prevention of terrorism or protecting national security, when in fact the measures are intended and subsequently used to stifle dissent.

However, people are starting to wake up.

The resistance builds

A couple of recent films examine these issues. Firstly, Chris Atkins' film *Taking Liberties* looks at the erosion of civil liberties under New Labour and is on general release now. If your cinema isn't showing it, then ask them why not. More information at www.noliberties.com. Secondly, Indymedia reporter, photographer and film-maker Rikki has just made a film called *SOCPA – the Movie*, which details the events, challenges and court cases which have taken place since the introduction of SOCPA. Rikki: 'This film is at times frightening, funny, shocking and deeply moving.' It is hoped to arrange a screening of Rikki's film locally in the Autumn. Very much a work in progress, the film is likely to be added to as the story unfolds.

Meanwhile, Mark Wallinger's work of art entitled *State Britain* is on display at Tate Britain in London and has been shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize. The piece recreates Brian Haw's display in Parliament Square in the weeks before most of it was stolen in the middle of the night by the police, an act they may live to regret. On 26 June, a summons was served on Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair for theft in respect of Brian's display. Two further summonses have been served on the

Chief Superintendents at Charing Cross and Hendon for receiving stolen goods. All are due in Westminster Magistrates Court on 24 July. Should be interesting.

Lastly, Gordon Brown has made noises about repealing the bits of SOCPA that relate to protest around Parliament, although we should not assume that whatever Gordon decides to put in its place will be any less restrictive or draconian.

Please support

Regarding my own court case, I would very much appreciate your support towards the costs of travelling down to London for the hearing in September.

I'm not asking for contributions towards any fine which may be imposed, because at the moment I'm still trying to work out how to refuse to pay without causing unnecessary distress to my family, who would prefer not to be barricading doors and windows against marauding bailiffs.

If more money is donated than I need for expenses, any excess will be handed over to Voices UK, working and campaigning in solidarity with the people of Iraq.

Please make cheques payable to: **Wrexham Peace & Justice Forum**, write 'SOCPA' on the reverse, and send to: WPJF, PO Box 661, Wrexham LL11 1QU. Thanks!

