

## Bristol's Kill the Bill Protest: A view from Rupert Street.



*On Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March, Bristol burst. After a year of lockdown after lockdown after lockdown, the city - which prides itself on liberal values - simply couldn't stand for the sacrifice of yet more freedoms. So, like many of my neighbours, I went to our city's "Kill the Bill" rally to play my part in protecting our right to protest. It was seen by the majority as a chance to set an example to the government and other would-be protestors that disruption during demonstrations isn't dangerous but peaceful and productive. I don't know what else to say except that there's a time and a place for violence, but this was neither.*

### **College Green, 2pm**

A crowd, the likes of which we'd not seen or heard from in this part of the world for nearly a year, came out from isolation to break the silence left by our lingering hibernation: some sat pensive on plateaus of pavement, while others beat down on drums or blew blueless tunes into brass, even more stood to listen, deliberated dance, danced, debated, discussed, chatted - but all chanted:

"Kill the Bill! Kill the Bill! Kill the Bill!"

And all the time it grew as individuals gravitated towards a call for justice by action on the streets.

"Whose streets?" was the question, "Our streets!" was the reply from a body united by one thing: to put down Priti Patel's oppressive Protest Bill.

But this body wasn't one cohesive clan or a finished faction. It was a leviathan; a cascading article of activists that drew in and on many different minds with an equal number of opinions, political persuasions, and ideological identifications.

Under the warmth of Spring's refreshing sun, the hammer and sickle of the Soviet flag flew side by side with the signs of Anarchists, who both brushed shoulders with Feminists, Pacifists, and leaders of the BLM protests, just to name a few.

Yet this technicoloured, multicultural mass marched in unison through their streets towards the harbour and our city's centre, all eyes fixed on the same outcome, the same result.

### **St Mary on Quay, 3pm**

As the crowd drew closer to where Colston's statue had once stood it came to a standstill of its own. Whilst paused, vocal protesters made their way up on to higher ground so they could converse with this complex collective. Some chose the steps of St Mary on Quay, a grand Catholic Church guarded by colossal stone columns. Others, including one notably charismatic speaker, decided to post up on top of a bus stop just opposite the old temple. His name, as I'd come to learn, is [Solomon O.B](#) - a poet, and an active member of Bristol's BLM scene.

He spoke with conviction about retaining the energy and fever of the crowd past the point when we all go home, which drew a wave of reassuring cheers, woops and applause from onlookers and passers-by. But my words will not do his justice, so let me quote from [a poem](#) he wrote last June in the aftermath of George Floyd's death, the sentiments of which still resonate today:

"Keep that same energy. If it's a house party, it's 4 in the morning, the convos popped up, it's awkward, now nobody's talking, keep that same energy. When you can see ours is drained from answering the same questions over and over and over and over and over and over and over again, keep that same energy. When it's easier not to, when it goes against your convenience, when all the options open back up and lockdown is lifted, and we all go back to our own lives, keep that same energy..."

### **Castle Park, 4pm**

When the crowd reached Castle Park, a festival-like feeling had begun to take hold of the protesters. Perhaps that was to be expected, considering the setting is typically a place to put your feet up. Many migrated to the green grass, towards the water and away from the concrete of the street. Jugglers juggled pins, and hoops were hoolaed while drinks then meal deals were consumed over carefree conversations.

It was as if we'd won, achieved our goals and now were relaxing in the safety of a post-pandemic paradise where Priti's plans had perished.

Calls to “Get off the grass!” and “Get back to the street!” quickly shattered these illusions though, as police pushed forwards, attempting to pick off the few who were left to defend our streets alone. Soon swarmed by a thousand bodies the officers retreated, escorted down the street by a helpful group of protesters, who showed them the way back to their station.

### **Rupert Street, 5:30pm**

The rest of the crowd joined them and in the dusk of Sunday’s evening we descended on Bridewell Police Station, Rupert Street.

Before the first bottle was thrown, the protest had been peaceful and the epitome of how powerful movements which refrain from violence can get their message across. Inclusive and universal, even young families were able to walk comfortably through the crowd and holding placards of their own they joined the conversation, which had been cultivated by the security peace provides.

One sign, carried by a boy of about 5 or 6 read, “I’m here so my voice still matters when I can vote.” Admittedly, the lettering was far too neat for him to have made it himself, but the point stands - peace produces productive deliberation and the debate necessary for change that allows *everyone*, not solely a single group, to have their say.

But that was then, and this was now.

Now was the time when a group of protesters decided to play out their revolutionary fantasy of climbing on top of a police van and jumping on its roof. Above the crowd they began to flex [their hoodies](#) which showed two silhouetted figures standing on top of a burning blue and yellow vehicle. Others began spray painting the rear of the van, while some of those around them hurled abuse and bottles at the officers guarding the station.

At this point, I’d worked my way through the crowd which I was simultaneously losing touch with. I wanted to see what was happening to the peaceful protest I’d marched amongst not an hour before. What I found I could not support, so I naively tried to change it.

As I reached the vandalised van, a protester who can’t have been much older than 17 decided he would add his contribution to the conflict. I tried to stop him and holding the can in his hand I said, “This isn’t what this protest is about, we’re undermining everything we’ve done today by acting like this!” At this point an older man came across and gently pulled me back, telling me to leave him be. In the meantime, the “wanna be Banksy” had finished his insightful and deeply meaningful contribution to the protest – a massive green cock.

I might sound like I'm being bit of a prick here too, and to be fair to the young lad he might have meant something truly powerful by vandalising that van in that way - I stand to be corrected - but the impression I got was that he was just taking advantage of the situation to have a cheap laugh.

Others in the crowd, however, saw the violent acts as a means of inciting change; a way to get the government to listen to us and kill the Bill which is being brought in to give police greater power to curtail even the mildest of protests.

My argument was, and is, that this particular rally was our way of showing how protests can be disruptive but don't have to be dangerous. That it was crucial that we didn't give the government any excuse to pass this particular Bill and, most importantly, that we set an example for how protests can work - not just for the benefit of the government - but for other potential protesters.

As I shouted at the crowd with this message I was met with mixed responses. Many offered support, some ignored me, and others confronted my attempts by telling me to "be an ally or fuck off." I ended up in a heated debate with two protesters in their late 20s who said that we've already tried peace, claiming that it doesn't work, backing their points up by citing examples of various revolutions. It was clear that I wasn't going to change their minds, so we respectfully bumped fists and parted ways.

### **At the end of the day**

Don't get me wrong, this frustration is understandable, and you can see where it's coming from. Even if we don't come from the same place or have the same experiences, as human beings we have the capacity to empathise with others and their problems; some of which we'll all be able to relate to and some of which we won't, but ultimately they're all problems that we share as a society and therefore have a collective responsibility to uncover and address together.

This is particularly important considering the context we find ourselves in regard to this past year. Throughout which, our government has largely succeeded only in failure. From economic and social mismanagement to police regulation and brutality, our representatives have consistently got it wrong. And the whole time they've increased our dependence on government protection from both economic and physical hardship, as our jobs, businesses, livelihoods, and freedoms have all been taken away.

At the end of the day, we all want the same thing; we just have different ways of going about getting it. We must respect that and attempt to understand where those who disagree with us are coming from. Sometimes, actually most of the time, that's the hardest thing *to do* - especially when you know

you're both trying to achieve the same result. I only hope that onlookers see past the end of last week's protest and to the aspects which illustrated so well the value and the capacity of peace.