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Mass policing of protests at COP26

Citation for published version:

Gorringe, H, Rosie, M, Reicher, S, Portice, J, Tekin, S & Hamilton, M 2024, 'How many cops to arrest climate chaos? Mass policing of protests at COP26', *Policing and Society*, pp. 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2024.2349590>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/14742837.2024.2349590](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2024.2349590)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Policing and Society

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To cite this article: Hugo Gorringe, Michael Rosie, Stephen Reicher, Jennie Portice, Selin Tekin & Michael Hamilton (04 May 2024): 'How many cops to arrest climate chaos?' Mass policing of protests at COP26, *Social Movement Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/14742837.2024.2349590](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2024.2349590)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2024.2349590>



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Published online: 04 May 2024.



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'How many cops to arrest climate chaos?' Mass policing of protests at COP26

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ABSTRACT

In advance of the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) summit in Glasgow in 2021, Police Scotland insisted that human rights and facilitation would be central to their operation. When the event passed off peacefully, without any of the mass arrests and disorder seen at previous iterations of COP, the Police declared it a huge success. We draw on research with activists and officers to scrutinize this claim and analyse the policing of COP26. Literature on protest policing suggests that global summits are distinctive, because the interplay between the security of Heads of state and other dignitaries, the local community and protestors is heavily biased in favour of security at such events. We suggest that this remains the case, despite the police emphasis on facilitation. We conclude that the 'human-rights-based approach' to policing is poorly defined and unevenly implemented and means different things to police and protestors. A fundamental rethinking of existing approaches and priorities is required for it to be meaningful.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 August 2023
Accepted 18 April 2024

KEYWORDS

COP26; protest; policing; human rights; facilitation

Introduction

In November 2021, the global COP26 (26th Conference of the Parties) climate summit was hosted in Glasgow. Given the climate crisis Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022), previous protests at such summits (Wahlström & de Moor, 2017), and an upsurge of direct action in the UK (Hensby, 2019),¹ large and disruptive protests were anticipated. Despite this, Police Scotland – the body policing the event – promised an operation based on 'human-rights and facilitation'.² Afterwards, the Strategic ('Gold') commander declared that the event had been a huge success: protests had been facilitated, arrests kept to a minimum, and *only* two containments imposed over the 2 weeks (Interview, 2021). Protestors and human rights-groups, by contrast, raised concerns. Amnesty International spoke of 'a gap between Police Scotland's warm words' and actions,³ and the police monitoring group The Network for Police Monitoring

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(NETPOL, 2021) reported ‘systemic abuses of power from Police Scotland throughout the . . . conference’. Their report, titled ‘Respect or Repression’ in reference to Operation *Urram* (Gaelic for ‘respect’), the Police Scotland code-name for the event, led with a photo of a protest banner which asked: ‘How many cops to arrest climate chaos?’

This paper draws on interviews with police and protestors and fieldwork throughout the summit to analyse the policing of COP26. Our particular focus is on how the human-rights-based approach was perceived, applied and described by police officers and protestors. We begin by reviewing literature on protest policing which sees global summits as exceptions to the perceived shift toward more facilitative policing in Western democracies. We then evaluate the theoretical and legislative context within which UK police forces have embraced (at least rhetorically) a commitment to human rights and facilitation. Having described the methods, we outline police and protest perspectives to analyse Operation *Urram*. We conclude that global summits continue to be policed distinctively, and that the ‘human-rights’ approach to policing is poorly defined, interpreted differently, and complex to deliver.

Policing global summits: cops at COP

Wahlström and de Moor (2017, p. 57) argue that: ‘since the decisive 2009 COP15 summit in Copenhagen, COPs have been major targets for protest activity and, correspondingly, surrounding city spaces have been subject to extensive policing’. They echo della Porta et al. (2006) who view summit protests as distinct from more routine policing, both because of the protest constituency attracted to such events and the presence of high-profile dignitaries. Whilst protest policing in Western democracies has witnessed a shift away from ‘escalated force’ – where officers respond with force to ‘prevent’ disorder – towards ‘negotiated management’ (McCarthy & McPhail, 1998), global summits are a partial exception. Starting with the mass protests that shut down the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999, police have struggled to deal with leaderless networks embracing a diversity of tactics (della Porta et al., 2006; Wahlström & de Moor, 2017) and have responded with ‘scaled up’ police operations (Crosby & Walby, 2023). Baker (2019, p. 1002) argues that policing at such events has tended to be more coercive and restrictive. More routinely, Baker (2014, p. 88) notes how geo-political sensitivities can erode civil liberties, as when the ‘New Zealand Police in Christchurch aided Chinese officials by manoeuvring buses and sirens to block noisy protesters . . . and Tibetan flags and placards from [Chinese President] Zemin’s hearing and sight’. If the target of the protests was the issue here, the identity of protestors shapes policing elsewhere. Gillham and Noakes (2007, p. 343), for instance, posit that police forces have responded to the refusal of ‘transgressive’ protestors to negotiate, with a tactic of ‘*strategic incapacitation*’. Whilst negotiated management rested on police-protestor co-operation and entailed toleration (or even facilitation) of some disruption to everyday life, the new approach deployed containments or ‘kettles’, preventative arrest, intelligence gathering (including surveillance and infiltration) and ‘extensive no-protest zones’, often to the detriment of protestors’ civil liberties.

O’Neill (2004) and Wahlström and de Moor (2017) note how these more restrictive approaches to policing have been exacerbated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks which altered perceptions of threat and risk and led to the increased use of less-lethal weaponry. O’Neill

(2004, p. 247) notes how ‘radical/anarchist groups play a high-profile role in transnational protests and their tactics generate disproportionate attention’. Gillham and Noakes (2007, p. 353) observe how public opposition to strategic incapacitation has been attenuated ‘because the tactics employed by some transgressive activists are not seen as legitimate by the mainstream media and public’. This, perhaps, explains why 2009’s COP15 in Copenhagen witnessed:

Concerted and violent police repression of peaceful demonstrations and actions. At the first major demonstration [...] when over 100,000 marched on the Bella Centre, the police made 963 arrests. This was during an overwhelmingly peaceful march. The arrests were pre-emptive. . . . [In] 2010 these pre-emptive arrests were ruled to be illegal. (Featherstone, 2013, p. 56)

The situation in Paris’s 2015 COP21 – the next COP intended to produce a new climate agreement – was overshadowed by Jihadist terrorist attacks before the summit which left 130 dead and hundreds injured. France declared a state of emergency and ‘banned all protests, forbidding any group of more than two individuals to express a political message in a public space’ (Wahlström & de Moor, 2017, p. 66). More than 20 people were put under house arrest, and police raided an activist squat (ibid). Whilst some protests were tolerated, there was a heavy presence of riot police throughout, and the most contentious march saw protestors kettled for 3–4 hours and hundreds of arrests (ibid, p.70). The police operation, these authors observe, involved ‘increased control of space and proactive, risk-based repression of activists’ (2017, p. 75).

Wahlström and de Moor (2017, p. 60) note ‘a strong trend toward prioritizing communicative tactics, such as police liaison’, but this took a back-seat in Paris. Elements of ‘negotiated management’ were seen as police sought to agree plans with protestors, but ongoing communication and dialogue – which Baker (2014, p. 83) sees as crucial to minimising police-protestor conflict – were lacking. The stress on dialogue reflects research suggesting ‘that when institutions act according to principles of procedural fairness, this . . . [can] encourage self-regulation among citizens’ (Bradford et al., 2014, p. 80). It also reflects findings that ‘robust’ policing can escalate, thus leading police ‘to rely on dialogue and de-escalation rather than repression in the face of dissent’ (Maguire, 2021, p. 309). Following the contentious policing of the G20 summit in London in 2009, an overhaul of public order policing in the UK drew insight from crowd psychology from the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) and aimed to prioritize dialogue (Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Constabulary [HMCIC], 2009).

Global summits, this reminds us, occur within specific jurisdictions with particular approaches to, and histories of, protest and policing (Gorringer & Rosie, 2008). Whilst past COP summits offer an insight into what to expect, therefore, it is important to note the specificities of the UK context. The HMIC report, combined with the domestication of European Human Rights law, fundamentally altered UK protest policing (on paper at least). The revised Association of Chief Police Officers’ (ACPO) guidance manual – *Keeping the Peace* – asserted that ‘the world of protest has changed and public order and practice must change with it’ (ACPO, 2010, p. 7). The guidance emphasized ‘policing by consent’ and stressed that ‘engagement and dialogue should be used, whenever possible, to demonstrate a “no surprises” approach’ (ibid, p.11). To this end, new Police Liaison Teams

(PLTs) were introduced, ‘to provide a link through dialogue between the police and groups. [PLTs are] ... deployed before, during and after events to establish and maintain dialogue with groups, adopting a community policing style’.⁴

Research on public order policing since these reforms has been mixed. Some argue that PLTs have reduced tension by building relationships of trust between police and protestors (Baker, 2019; Ricketts, 2020; Stott et al., 2013), others suggest facilitation is confined to ‘protest that conforms largely to the police definition of what is acceptable’ (de Lint & Hall, 2009; Jackson et al., 2019, p. 38; Sylvestre, 2021). Faced by protestors who do not engage with them, Gorringe et al. (2012, p. 128) observe, ‘the default position was for the police to fall back on tactics of strategic incapacitation’. Hamilton (2021, p. 394) similarly concludes that public order policing in the UK remains geared towards the ‘management of protest rather than primarily its facilitation’. Jackson et al. (2019), therefore, call for researchers to engage with direct action protestors to understand how policing plays out on the ground. COP26 was held in Glasgow and overseen by Police Scotland, an organisation which prides itself on policing by consent and facilitation. This matters, because della Porta et al. (2006, p. 12) emphasize the continuing significance of ‘internal (police organisations and police culture/philosophy)’ factors to global policing. Research on forces in Scotland notes that ‘the discursive construction of Scottishness has ramifications for how policing is conceived and conducted’ (Gorringe & Rosie, 2010, p. 80). COP26, thus, offers an unparalleled opportunity to observe the interplay between protestors and police in the context of a global summit in Scotland.

Methods

The research was conducted by an interdisciplinary research team which engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, observing police and protestor interactions on each day of the summit.

The research team was divided in two, with half focused on police and the other on protest. Several members of the team were present on all the main marches and protest events including the two ‘containments’, one of which we were caught up in. We were open about the overall project to all respondents, but the separation of teams enabled us to engage with protest groups who may have avoided those working with the police (cf. Jackson et al., 2019). During observations we engaged in informal discussions with protestors and police officers, and fieldnotes were written each day. The team discussed impressions and experiences to ensure that we had captured key issues and incidents. Additionally, we conducted over 30 pre- and post-summit interviews with police officers and a range of different activists that reflected on people’s expectations, experiences, and reflections. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes in what follows are from these interviews, which have been anonymized to protect confidentiality. Data was transcribed, coded and analysed thematically and discussed among the team to enhance consistency. The research received ethical approval from the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences at the University of Edinburgh (PPLS ethics approval 5–2122/11).

'Glasgow's miles Better'⁵?

Unlike Copenhagen or Paris there were no mass arrests or serious clashes between protestors and police. Senior police officers hailed the event as a huge success. As the Tactical ('Silver') Commander reflected:

We have comparatively small numbers of arrests, we have no members of the public injured, no police officers injured, relatively small complaints about the police – twenty-five in total. Very, very few occasions when we've had to adopt what you might call the upper tactics of public order. So, for the most part, it's been policed in the way that we would hope ... because we've been able [...] to have that facilitative approach to protest.

The Gold Commander was similarly satisfied:

If somebody had said to me a couple of months ago 'you'll only get twenty-five complaints during COP', I'd have said 'you're kidding yourself on. We'll have at least four, five, ten times that.' If somebody said to me 'you're only going to arrest ninety-seven people', I would have said 'I'll take ninety-seven people *a day*.' [...] And part of it is because the activists were really engaged with us, part of it is because our officers bought into the facilitation and engagement, to reach common ground.

To add further context, the 97 arrests were not all of activists but included delegates, security guards and others attending the conference. Lest this suggest that the prime determinant of 'Human Rights policing' is the number of arrests, a protestor running events at COP reinforced the sense of police engagement noting that: 'they've been very friendly when we've spoken to them for directions and so on, we've spoken to them at our outreach yesterday. Yeah, we've had a very positive experience'. A Green Party and XR activist conceded that: 'At one point the police were training with water cannons and things like that, so I really was expecting the policing of COP to be a lot worse, a lot more heavy-handed than it was.'

From a police perspective, 'success' sprang from careful planning and effective engagement. If the Paris COP took place in the aftermath of deadly terrorist attacks, COP26 was delayed by the global pandemic and held amidst continued concerns over the virus. Covid-related restrictions on public processions and events had been in force, and some activists feared that these might be used to curb protest. The lack of mass arrests, violent disorder and heavy-handed policing is welcome, therefore, but offers a minimalist approach to 'human rights policing'.

Police Scotland recognize that it needs to mean more than this, and the Gold Commander said beforehand:

As John Scott QC [Chair of the Independent Advisory Group] rightly says, 'noisy protest is a sign of a strong democracy'. And that's got to be fundamentally based on the Human Rights Act and the European Convention of Human Rights and all the elements of that we have to absolutely respect and quite rightly so. So, there's a bit about telling the protestors [about] it, but there's also a bit about managing delegations from countries who wouldn't tolerate the protest that we're likely to see in Glasgow.

Not only does this stress the value and importance of protest, given the example (above) of New Zealand police accommodating the Chinese Premier's desire to avoid protests,

the insistence that human-rights messaging is *equally* directed at protestors and international delegates is important. The Silver Commander likewise insisted:

The approach is always the same [regardless of which type of protestor is involved], it's engagement based, it's 'no surprises', it's ascertaining what the intentions of each group is, and then advising them on whether or not that was likely to be within the law, of course, and whether that's acceptable in terms of how we're planning to police it.

Whilst this raises Jackson et al.'s (2019) concern about police definitions of 'unacceptable' protest, the emphasis was on *peaceful* rather than *lawful* protest and on facilitation being the norm. This, as Mead (2010) notes, is in accordance with the Human Rights Act. Whilst the police had a four-fold typology of protestors – mainstream marchers, single-issue protestors, direct action activists like Extinction Rebellion (XR), and violent and disorderly groups – they stressed that intervention would be based on *behaviour* not perception. An Operational ('Bronze') Commander from England spelled out the 'British Model of policing':

The fact is, if you look [...] on the continent of Europe how they deal with protest, if you watch the *Gilet Jaunes* protests and how much violence was used against them [in France], they had similar ways of [protesting than] XR did when they were doing it at the start of the mass demonstrations, but then tear gas and water cannon and very violent items were used against them, and we don't use that in the UK, we stand there and let them shout at us. [...] We do look to try and keep engagement going throughout, right up until the point when we can't.

Implicit here is the sense of a threshold beyond which police intervention will escalate, and the Gold Commander suggested that this message was communicated to protestors:

We're already talking to all the protest groups. Our police liaison officers have been doing this for months. And we go in, and there's two elements to it, and we say 'what is it you want to achieve? What is it you want to do? We will facilitate that as far as we can. Here's the consequences of when you cross this boundary.' So, part of my policing strategy is no surprises for anybody.

One of XR's police liaison activists echoed this:

We had a preliminary meeting with the Gold commander and the Silver commander for [...] Operation *Urram*, where they stated that they are a rights respecting police force and they will facilitate peaceful protest. But they equally were saying there are certain things they will not tolerate. And it's quite difficult at COP26 because you've got all these heads of state there, and the blue zone around the SEC doesn't come under Scottish law, that comes under international law. [...] And we won't get anywhere near that space, there's no two ways about it, we will not get into the blue zone, and it would probably be not a good idea to try because it would be dangerous.

The meeting had clearly managed to impress on the activist the parameters within which the police could and would facilitate action and the rationale. Rather than viewing this as problematic, an XR protestor from Edinburgh suggested that: 'As a movement I think XR Scotland has built a degree of trust with the Scottish police and there are quite good channels where information is passed back and forth'. Trust and communication are key to successful dialogue and, in the traditions of 'negotiated management', police liaised extensively with organizers of the large set-piece march in the middle weekend, to offer advice and support. Significantly, they also claimed to

have ‘facilitated a number of illegal processions where no action was taken, because of that stated style or tone we were seeking to achieve’ (Silver Commander). There were incidents where police *did* facilitate direct action. When activists from XR’s ‘Scientist Rebellion chained themselves across King George V Bridge, police rerouted traffic and engaged in dialogue. In due course the protestors were unlocked and arrested: which was, essentially, what they had aimed at. More strikingly, Greenpeace sailed their *Rainbow Warrior* up the Clyde despite warnings by the Harbour Authority that they would be breaking maritime law and were likely to strike the underside of a major arterial bridge. With Greenpeace determined to continue despite these risks, Police Scotland and the Harbour Authority compromised and closed the Erskine Bridge. The yacht passed under with minimal clearance room. More routinely, ‘illegal processions’ may be those that have not notified authorities in advance, the fact that some were facilitated, points towards the discretionary powers held by the police.

In Manchester’s fracking protests, Jackson et al. (2019, p. 32) note, such discretion allowed certain protests to be seen as ‘unacceptable’, and ‘protestors were not included as one of the parties with “mutual interests” in the delivery of the Gold strategy’ (Jackson et al., 2019, p. 32). Police Scotland, by contrast, established an Independent Advisory Group (IAG) to monitor the operation and invited prominent activists and groups like Amnesty International onto it. As a COP Coalition activist noted:

Police Scotland wanted to be different from other police forces around the world and said ‘we are actively seeking out dialogue with civil society representatives including climate activists, including human rights lawyers, we’re going to bring them together, explain our policing strategy, you can come and observe our trainings, you can see all these things.’ And it sounded really great on paper.

As the final comment suggests, such initiatives can result in tokenistic forms of engagement that do not alter the underlying modes of policing. The IAG continued through the summit, offering a forum for concerns to be raised and compelling the police to justify their actions, but activist members had ceased to attend and groups like Amnesty International remained sceptical about its value.⁶ COP26 Coalition activists lost trust in the process when select activists, politicians and media were invited to police training. Whilst the police saw this as being transparent, one activist said:

95% was them preparing for riots, so the ‘climate activists’ began to throw stones at them and tried to batter them with baseball sticks and stuff. And these images made it to the media. So that was a deliberate attempt of the police to frame the protests as something that is potentially violent.

Police Scotland explained to us that the training was carried out over several days and dealt with escalation and de-escalation of tensions. The final training day – the one they chose to open up to scrutiny – comprised only the ‘extreme scenarios’ they had to prepare for, even if it was not expected. Opening up that particular day may have been aimed at reassuring a wider public that police were trained, equipped, and ready for the worst possible scenarios, but it communicated the potential for violent disorder and was seen as delegitimising protest.

The activist description above echoes Hoggett and Stott's (2010, p. 230) finding that: 'in training, the focus is exclusively upon the forceful control and disruption of groups suspected of intending to act unlawfully while little time is spent discussing means through which the legitimate behaviour of all fans can be facilitated'. Second, it suggests an alternative reading of Operation *Urram* in which the emphasis on Human-Rights and facilitation are subject to question. Including both police and protestor perspectives enables us to get beyond the rhetoric to analyse how police interventions occurred and were perceived.

'A sea of cops': over-policing and control?

Pre-event, the Gold Commander noted that it was 'the highest number of police officers that have ever been deployed in Scotland and possibly the UK'. He insisted that this reflected '...a professional assessment about what the intelligence is, what the threat assessment is, and building in a proportionate but flexible and capable police response to deal with the challenges'. Maintaining order clearly remains a priority, and the Silver Commander conceded that there would be questions 'around the proportionality and that kind of saturation, suffocation of policing. ... If lots of things happen, then there's things to write about and criticize, if nothing happens it was over-policed'.

As anticipated here, a key talking point related to police numbers. A former journalist involved in the set-piece march was typical in saying:

I covered G8, have been to Faslane, so I've seen a wee bit of how police normally deal with direct action and stuff like that. I have *never* seen as many police in my life. I didn't think there were that many police. Up till the Wednesday, till the really high-end delegates left – till that point in terms of police to protestor numbers you are talking 10, 20, 30 to 1 – it was just overwhelming.

Most activist interviews mentioned the volume of officers, and intimated the negative impact it had in terms of protest. A media activist from the COP26 coalition called it 'the most police per protestor I've ever experienced'. A Green Party member echoed this point and its impact on protest opportunities: 'The police presence was, I would say, disproportionate. ... It was much quieter than I expected for COP, and I think that's because there was such a heavy police presence'. An activist affiliated to XR and the Scottish Community and Activist Project (SCALP) thought it was: 'Unbelievable! I remember doing the climate ceilidh on the Friday or whatever and you looked out and there was just a sea of fluorescent yellow. There were more cops than protestors'. An Edinburgh-based XR activist summed up the prevailing mood in saying that the police were: 'Excessive in numbers. Hugely excessive in numbers. ... Yeah, it seemed like there was a definite attempt to intimidate and to flex muscle or show that they had control'. In 'preparing for the worst' and seeking to avoid disorder, the policing was perceived and experienced as restrictive by activists.

Significantly, concerns about policing were not confined to protestors; several of our police interviewees raised issues too. A Bronze officer from England said: 'In terms of the actual deployment of the police there, probably the main thing that people noticed, and

we noticed ourselves, was just the absolute sheer volume of police officers'. Another senior English officer's concerns extended further:

I don't think we helped ourselves with the number of cops. Because every time I drove to a back street to park the vehicles up, I would pass just a sea of cops, like I've never seen before. And we were dressed in our public order gear [...] Personally I didn't feel that comfortable wearing it because I didn't really look like a cop, I looked like a Gendarme, and at no point did I feel I needed to wear it.

This points to differences among the police – as a Scottish Bronze commander insisted that deploying in 'Code 2'⁷ did 'not look too militaristic' – but also signals the importance of non-verbal cues in police–protestor interactions (cf. della Porta, 1998). Whilst the police may have aimed to engage and facilitate, the sheer number of officers and the fact that they were attired differently suggested otherwise.

If some were concerned about the optics of the uniform, others were concerned about public engagement. An officer from rural Scotland raised the point that:

The city centre is flooded with cops from outwith Scotland, they don't know Glasgow, they don't know the people. When people need advice or directions to go, they can't tell them, so it could be perceived as quite stand-offish and unhelpful.

Whilst Gold's prescription for officers was 'just talk to' people, this points to the difficulties attending large events in which external officers are brought in. The result, as an environmental activist reflected, was that:

It felt like there was a complete disjunction between the way that COP was policed and the way that we generally experience policing in Scotland. And I think that passers-by in Glasgow picked up on that and were not happy with the level of policing, the numbers, or the general attitude of the police to the protestors.

Indeed, in stark contrast to the positive assessments offered earlier, the Netpol report concluded that 'Police Scotland not only failed to protect human rights during their policing of COP26, but in many cases actively hindered or violated human rights'. Similarly, an open letter from the COP26 Coalition to Scotland's First Minister outlined: 'an atmosphere in which people are afraid to simply unfurl banners, march and chant, creating an unacceptable chilling effect on the right to protest'.⁸

A media activist spoke of the incident on Day 1, when two children abseiled off a Bridge next to the Blue Zone and unveiled a banner:

[The police] went through this very lengthy arrest process of the parents, who were obviously there and weren't going to let their children do it on their own. They were there supervising them and it looked like they were very competent. They obviously evaluated the risk and thought 'yeah, we're going to do this protest', it wasn't reckless, I should have thought. But they [police] got the dad with his hands cuffed behind his back and they were actually saying 'we're going to take your children away from you in custody' [...] I think that was probably the most shocking thing I saw policing-wise in the whole of COP.

The fact that this was on the first day meant that it set the tone for what police would and would not tolerate. Activists expressed alarm at the reference to 'child protection' both here and at a protest camp. As one affiliated to SCALP said: 'People take part in protests,

they may be up for being arrested. They have a certain understanding of what risks they are taking on, but when those risks apply to their kids that is truly despicable'. Such raising of 'safeguarding' concerns, Jackson et al. (2019) argue, points towards a delegitimisation of protest.

Activists felt that this was also evident on the two occasions when protestors were contained for hours without access to toilets, in threats to arrest those performing the police liaison role for protest groups, or times when individuals were 'followed home' or to cafes. Silver insisted that:

This is not about following innocent protestors, this is not about following people who are simply seeking to make their voice heard, this is absolutely about preventing criminal behaviour. [...] it's only based on an assessment or a reaction to the behaviours of that particular group, and it's not done proactively without cause or without reason.

Since none of the protestors were engaged in violence, this seemed both disproportionate and to run against the emphasis on human rights. Interviewees were also dismayed by what they saw as 'heavy-handed' arrests. An activist in XR spoke of the arrest of a protestor for climbing the turnstile outside the Blue Zone: 'He was dragged down, absolutely about half a dozen policemen pounced on him. Totally immobilized him, in a way that was out of all proportion to what he was doing'. As noted above, XR activists understood that such incursions would not be tolerated because of concerns over delegate safety ('we will not get into the blue zone, and it would probably be not a good idea to try'), but felt that overpowering a *peaceful* protestor was disproportionate. This captures some of the complexities of devising a Human-Rights focused police operation, since from a police perspective, multiple officers are *required* to make arrests safely *without* excessive force. The researchers who witnessed the arrest felt that it looked excessive, though no violence was used. Part of the issue, thus, may be about communication. As Silver reflected, this is a balancing act:

It's not meant to be intimidatory, it's actually meant to ensure the safety of the persons concerned [...] But if the very thing you're trying to prevent [disorder] is caused by the act that you put in place, then of course the wisdom of that needs to be considered.

Similar consideration is called for in relation to what may have been seen as an information gathering exercise and/or an attempt to set up lines of communication. A COP26 Coalition steward recounted how:

The police went to all of the venues we had in Glasgow as a Coalition. We're a broad society coalition, very peaceful, very proper, no shenanigans at all, and they knocked on every door and asked whether there are Extinction Rebellion activists there. And that spooked so many venues that some of them pulled out and [...] it led to this kind of separation of civil disobedience activists and 'proper civil society' that the coalition was set out to avoid in the first place. So the police systematically tried to drive a wedge between all the 'bad protestors' and the 'good people'.

It is not clear whether police action here was aimed at engaging in facilitative dialogue, or had a more control-oriented purpose. Either way, it was perceived as singling out XR, reflecting their prominence in direct action protests in the UK. Such perceptions jarred sharply with pre-summit attempts to build relationships. The seeming flouting of these channels, may speak to miscommunications within the police operation or to the

distinctiveness of summit protests in which the smooth running of the conference and delegate safety predominate (cf. della Porta et al., 2006). This, however, can alienate activists, erode relationships, and delegitimize the overall police operation. As the Police College's discussion of tactics notes: 'Any departure from normal policing may weaken links with the community/partners and may reduce the flow of community information/intelligence'.⁹

A human rights approach?

From a policing perspective, Operation *Urram* was a success. Disorder and arrests were minimal and the more aggressive tactics available (dogs, horses, shields and batons) were hardly used. Silver concluded that: 'in terms of numbers, in terms of proportionality, we think we got it largely right'. Numbers of police were seen as justified given expectations and recent protests, though Silver noted the absence of the 'violent disorderly level of protest' associated with 'Category 4' protestors; 'We did expect some, but it turned out we didn't actually see any, and I'm delighted in that case to have had the resource and not need it'.

In late August 2021, a couple of months before COP26, XR had launched their 'Impossible Rebellion' in London which saw large-scale disruption and many arrests. Police Scotland assumed that this was a dress rehearsal for the summit, and the upshot was that the police presence appeared disproportionate. A former journalist involved in the Nature Block for the large march, however, felt that there was 'nothing in their [police] *behaviour* that was intimidating. Didn't see any horses. Didn't see any armed cops – they are at the airport or train station – but not there'. Beyond the sheer volume of officers, he felt that policing at the summit was less aggressive than on similar occasions in the past. For the vast majority of protestors on the big march, likewise, the police were there to stop traffic and 'probably more there for like terrorist problems' as one put it. As a mutual aid Bronze commander from England argued:

The whole point is that we're not there to deter protest, we're there to deter criminality. And some people, it's their definition of protest which is to make a direct action. Most direct action involves criminal damage, throwing paint on a building, gluing yourself to a building, that's criminal damage, it's breaking the law.

Captured here is the difficulty of finding a definition of Human-Rights based policing that will satisfy both sides. When the standard tactics of peaceful direct-action protestors are lumped together as 'criminality' we see the huge power imbalance between protestors and police. An Inspector from Police Scotland contextualized the police response by pointing to responsibilities towards others:

We, as an organisation, have to ensure that people have the opportunity to legally protest peacefully and we have to facilitate that. However, we've also got to facilitate the general population and the public to lawfully go about their business, and we're the ones that are always stuck in the middle.

Whilst police respondents stressed the need for 'balance', activists expressed frustration at this approach, which they saw as impinging on their right to protest:

R3: Seems very unbalanced to say your right to freedom of speech and to stand up for your rights versus your right to go down a certain road at a certain time or to go shopping.

R2: Yeah, I hate the way the rights of car drivers are given more rights, more value, than the right of me to say that we can't keep carrying on with this way of life.

An issue here, of course, is that public agencies, including police, have a statutory duty to uphold *everybody's* full range of human rights, not just the right to protest. The policing of protest, thus, needs to consider disruption to the life of the community. Finding a balance between potentially competing rights is a delicate task. For all Police Scotland's emphasis on 'engagement', 'human rights', and 'facilitation' ahead of COP26, these quotes indicate that they have radically different priorities and perceptions to the protestors. As an interviewee linked to Netpol observed:

Essentially the metric or the measure for Police Scotland's operation was going to be how many arrests there were, so they made a big deal about the fact there weren't loads of arrests. But obviously that's a pretty negative way of measuring whether you've adopted a human rights-based approach to policing.

Significantly, these concerns were not just confined to protestors. A senior English officer reflected that there were 'loads of cops, but actually people didn't really feel like they could protest, so [commanders] didn't quite get the balance right'. Likewise, the former journalist raised questions of proportionality, saying: 'If chatting to cops I would say: think about the scale of it and how it looked'. Several Scottish interviewees felt that policing at COP26 was heavier and more repressive than they were used to. As a *Global Justice Now* affiliate said:

We were kind of expecting [...] that the police would try to stop disruptive things but they would be very keen to show that Scotland is a haven of democracy and facilitate peaceful things, and this is what they've been saying the whole way up, that they would take a rights-based approach to policing and that they would have control over all of the officers that were coming up from England. This was not the case at all. The attitude was much more like 'squash the dissidents'.

More starkly, a Green Party and XR activist said: 'I fail to see how Police Scotland facilitated anything, really'. One of XR's police liaison spelled out more clearly what the 'anything' meant here:

If we managed to do anything more than a static protest with a few speakers, it was because we managed to get away with it. Whereas previously, the expectation was that they will facilitate some more of the spicier actions. And by 'facilitate' it is not that they are happy with it and working on our side, it is that they want to retain a good enough relationship. [...] It does feel like a betrayal of this very long and hard fought for relationship, where we can trust them not to be too oppressive if we – if they can trust us to not do the things we say we are not going to do beforehand.

Police liaison and engagement aims to build trust and legitimacy that reduces tensions and means that groups are more likely to police themselves (Stott et al., 2013). In appearing to renege on earlier agreements, activists were more likely to experience the policing as illegitimate. Significantly, a police liaison officer was also conflicted:

The majority of the protest was peaceful. Yes, it might have been obstructive, slightly disruptive, but the majority of it was peaceful. But then you get this kind of militant public order style to it, which looks great but is perceived as being really heavy-handed and really ‘oh, not seen that before.’ [...] The whole mutual aid routinely stopping vehicles that are on watchlists and potentially trying to search them . . . for the purposes of the operation; ‘it’s one less thing to worry about, it takes it off the street, so we’ll take the hit’, kind of thing. I absolutely don’t agree with that. And has my confidence in Police Scotland reduced slightly? In that, I’m sure before COP26 I would say ‘that won’t happen in Police Scotland, that’s not the organisation that I know’. Do I have confidence saying that going forward? I don’t know if I do.

What we see here is an officer who works closely with protest groups reflecting critically on aspects of the operation. Two issues arise here: first, we see how local relationships and agreements are threatened during large events, when large numbers of outside officers are brought in. Second, we see how officers tasked with liaison may feel peripheral to the overall policing operation (cf. Stott et al., 2013), raising questions about the centrality of facilitation.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the literature that both charts an emerging global consensus on the values of negotiation-based policing and questions the extent to which this results in greater facilitation of protest (Baker, 2019; de Lint & Hall, 2009). Despite Police Scotland’s emphasis on human rights, it seems clear that global summits continue to be policed differently and more heavily (Baker, 2019; della Porta et al., 2006). The low numbers of arrests and levels of conflict are welcome, and many respondents compared the policing favourably to that experienced elsewhere, but there were no ‘violent or disorderly’ protestors. Despite this, most respondents commented on police numbers, increased surveillance, and decreased willingness to tolerate disruption. Many activist interviewees saw Operation *Urram* as using forms of ‘strategic incapacitation’ (Gillham & Noakes, 2007) and limiting political agency through the scale of the operation (Crosby & Walby, 2023). The presence of protected persons, and increased media and political scrutiny, appear to reduce the operational risks that police are willing to take. The influx of mutual aid officers also disrupts existing relationships. There was some willingness to tolerate disruption by peaceful protestors, but the onus was on activists to engage with the police to secure concessions and those that failed to negotiate were policed more robustly (cf. Sylvestre, 2021).

‘Human-rights based policing’, thus, remains poorly defined and heavily contested. The size of summit protests create potential for significant disruption to the life of the general community, an issue that police are statutorily obliged to consider, but ‘competing rights’, and the need to balance rights to protest with the rights of the community at large mean that the approach has numerous grey areas. The police emphasis on human-rights, thus, risks creating expectations that they either will not or cannot meet. Ricketts’ (2020, p. 399) research in Australia suggests ‘that negotiation can have significant substantive benefits to police, to the protest movement involved, and to the community at large that go well beyond

ritualistic dialogue’. This, however, requires considerable give and take from both sides and needs to include the views and perspectives of protest constituencies too. Drawing on Tyler’s work, Bradford et al. (2014, p. 87) argue that: ‘Police-citizen encounters are “teachable moments” holding the potential to enhance or diminish police legitimacy, encourage or undermine positive social identities, and strengthen or weaken normative compliance with the law’. We suggest that some elements of Operation *Urram* reduced trust and confidence amongst *both* protesters and police. The ‘success’ of COP26, therefore, may come at a cost.

Notes

1. See a report on protest related arrests in London here: <https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/extinction-rebellion-2021-protest-arrests> (Accessed 03/03/2023).
2. See the full press release from Police Scotland here: <https://www.scotland.police.uk/what-s-happening/news/2021/august/police-scotland-puts-human-rights-at-the-heart-of-cop26-protest-plans/> (Accessed 03/03/2023).
3. Read Amnesty International’s review of COP26 policing here: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/scottish-human-rights-blog/policing-cop26-and-right-protest-scotland> (Accessed 03/03/2023).
4. See the description of the tactic on the Police College site here: <https://www.college.police.uk/app/public-order/tactical-options> (Accessed 22/03/2023).
5. This refers to an advertising campaign: BBC NEWS | Scotland | Why Glasgow was ‘miles better’ (Accessed 24/03/2023).
6. See the Amnesty evaluation of the Independent Advisory Group here: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/scottish-human-rights-blog/policing-cop26-and-right-protest-scotland>
7. Code 1 refers to the full riot outfit, Code 2 sees officers wearing flame retardant overalls but no helmets, pads or shields, allowing them to swiftly get kitted up if needed.
8. Read the full letter here: Open Letter to Nicola Sturgeon on Policing at COP26 - Climate Justice Coalition (Accessed 27/03/2023).
9. See the full entry here: Tactical options | College of Policing (Accessed 28/03/2023).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to *The New Foundation* for funding to employ two post-doctoral researchers and film-makers. The research was also aided by strategic research funding from the Universities of Edinburgh, St. Andrews and East Anglia. We are indebted to Chris Kelly and Patrick ‘Patch’ Bodenham for film footage of the events. We gratefully acknowledge the input of other members of the research team: Suzanne Dixon, Fergus Neville, Helena Radke, Anne Templeton, Sara Vestergren, and Sam Vo. Finally the research would not have been possible without the police and protest respondents who gave up their valuable time to interact with us.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the The New Foundation Institute University of East Anglia University of Edinburgh.

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