

# Silence in the streets

Armed with just a noticeboard and a stapler, an DPhil Oxford student broke the world record for the number of protests in one day. The twist? All were carried out in Parliament Square, where SOCPA legislation means free speech is under threat and wearing a political T-shirt is an arrestable offence



**Joe Parker**

4th year DPhil student,  
Linacre college

It's 8.30 on a wet Monday morning in January. I'm standing beside the Thames outside 11 Millbank – better known as 'MI5' – holding a small cork noticeboard taped to a broom handle. I'm trying my best to look reasoned, righteous and – above all – lawful, as my excellent view of the river is spoiled by two black, efficient-looking submachine-guns gripped by a pair of the Met's finest. For the last five minutes we've been having a heated debate spanning police operating procedures, Government green papers and ancient civil liberties, to decide whether I have the right to stand here at the corner of the road by the rush-hour traffic.

Eventually the policemen, their guns and a curious piece of legislation officially on the statute books as 'SOCPA (2005) s132-138' all prove as powerful as the mighty ebb tide of the Thames itself and so I walk away with my board. I have not been arrested but, in some sense, I don't feel free either.

The copper has offered to arrest – or, as he ominously puts it, "process" – me because pinned to my board is an A3 piece of paper with the handwritten words 'B-is-for-Margaret-Beckett – Get Out Of Your Caravan And Get A Clue' and her mugshot in all its grainy laserjet glory.

It's a modest enough statement of political

opinion, and I and my companions Todd and Chris are doing little more than standing benignly in the rain, taking turns to lean sleepily on the broom handle and half-heartedly offer our opinion in a Michael-Palin-cum-market-trader patina to anyone who'll listen.

We have undertaken to carry out 26 separate demonstrations in one day, with a different target politician for each letter of the alphabet. We will become record breakers, stealing an official Guinness World Record held by comedian-activist Mark Thomas (21 protests) but though the tone of our demonstrations (from 'A-is-for-Dianne-Abbot: Stop Laughing At Portillo's Rubbish Gags!' to 'Z-is-for-Zac-Goldsmith: Pick A Party And Stick To It!') is flippant, our purpose is deadly serious.

This is because for every single one of our miniscule, peaceful, Goons-esque protests we have had to give the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police advance notice in writing detailing our proposed actions. We don't quite need to tell them our eye colour and favourite toothpaste; but they do want exact timings to the minute, meeting details and press briefings. It's a lot of information to fill in 26 times just to exercise our right to stand around with a silly banner. And as well as being laborious, intimidating and Byzantine it turns out this right can be suspended, as our armed friends' behaviour demonstrates.

Others have discovered this the hard way: Maya Evans was the first person convicted under this legislation. Her crime? Reading out the names of the British and Iraqi war dead by the Cenotaph in Whitehall. She pointed out that the range of police powers granted to the police on the day, "Makes it so draconian and anti-freedom... that's not really a free demonstration."

Similarly, comic-turned-activist Mark Thomas was incensed by the scope of SOCPA, but typically saw the surreal nature of the special legal conditions around Parliament as a comic opportunity. After Thomas's friend was threatened with arrest for picnicking with a political Victoria sponge iced with 'Peace' upon its jammy face, he decided to highlight the bizarre restrictions. He organised a series of peculiarly British protests in favour of trolls, surrealism, bans on surrealism and the record-setting speed-protest we're attempting to better today.

However with a straight face, and at some expense, Thomas is now seeking a public prosecution of Gordon Brown, who last autumn may have inadvertently broken the law by reading aloud a speech by Nelson Mandela live on TV in Parliament Square itself.

This may have prompted the Government to institute a 'public consultation' which reports this month. There were hopes that this could lead to a government climbdown. However, official nods and winks to the 'harmonization' of police powers have led some to suggest an expansion of the rules countrywide. I put this to a Home Office spokesperson, who insists the consultation was merely to see if "there remains to be a case for the current legislation". When pressed, however, they



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