

refused to comment on or rule out suggestions that powers might be expanded across the country, insisting there had to be a law governing protest since without one, “anyone could turn up” – clearly a nightmare scenario for the Government.

Suppose, I wondered, an ordinary member of the public – with no legal training – takes issue with a topical Government policy, gets an unpaid day off work and hops on a train down to London with a placard? Wouldn't they be guilty through ignorance of an offence? The Home Office were at a total loss, ending the interview.

Baroness Sue Miller (Lib Dem) will this week probe the Home Office to promote her aim of repealing the SOCPA legislation. She feels so strongly against the law that she has organized a protest against it with her fellow bureaucrats. The law's, she explained, “clearly nonsense – incredibly bureaucratic. It's in place for one of three reasons, and only the Government can say why; because Brian Haw's protest was untidy; because it was an embarrassment to Blair; or because of a perceived terrorist threat. Well, the information we get from Black Rod – security briefings – tells us that in relation to the security issue it's the road that's always seen as the real difficulty, not protestors. It's a small step towards a police state. People should be able to demonstrate”. Any proposal to extend the powers nationwide would, she said, be “chilling”. Chief Inspector Paul Switzer is the policeman with responsibility for enforcing the law throughout most of Parliament Square. He is helpful, polite and (for someone simultaneously policing a football match during our interview) attentive. Nonetheless, he has the strained air of a man trying to enforce the laws of an *Alice In Wonderland* world, where crossing a road can turn a T-shirt into political heavy weaponry.

Our team was repeatedly asked to produce a paper copy of our authorization, he reasoned, because it was “common sense... it saves time”, but he agreed it wasn't necessary. In that case, I ask, would it then be unlawful for a policeman to demand it of a demonstrator under threat of arrest? He could only concede that “a lot of police pass through the area... some may not be as au fait with SOCPA as the various units that work that area”. It seems even the police are in confusion over the law.

As he rings off, I feel a bit confused, too. It all seems reasoned, reasonable, even. But I reflect: the courageous protestor bravely standing up for their beliefs is part of freedom's folklore, part of the language of democracy we take for granted.

The right to assemble with others, to freely and peacefully protest is one of the most ancient and basic liberties we enjoy. Since medieval times the basic right to petition those ruling us has never been called into question. Security threats are clearly a smokescreen – but should we now subordinate this right to present a friendly face to visitors, or allow the government to meet in peace?

I hope not. I have been to another place in the world where the organs of government meet peacefully while tourists happily snap away. The photos are of Lenin's tomb, the place is Red Square, and the ‘unhindered Government’ is that of Putin's Russia. It's efficient, certainly. But it's not accountable, and an insult to our history and traditions if we allowed it to happen here●

*For more information, go to the SOCPA facebook group, or search for ‘SOCPA record attempt’ on YouTube to find the video diary of Joe's protests.*



One man was threatened with arrest for picnicking with a political Victoria sponge with the word ‘peace’ iced on its jammy face



## Protester profile: Brian Haw



On 2 June 2001, Haw began camping in Parliament Square in a one-man protest against the war in Iraq. He was particularly against the sanctions imposed by the Government. After 11 September, 2001, Haw widened his protest to include criticism of the ‘war on terror’. The 58 year old former carpenter from Barking has now become a powerful symbol in the campaign for peace and freedom of expression.

Married with seven children, Haw cites the need to improve his children's future as one of the main reasons for his campaign. Ironically, however, and perhaps unsurprisingly, his crusade has placed considerable stress on his family life.

Leaving his campsite only to attend court hearings, Haw survives on food brought by well-wishers. He has a network of local supporters, and visits their houses on rotation to shower and wash clothes.

The first challenge to his protest came in October 2002 when Westminster City Council attempted to prosecute him for obstructing the pavement with his banners. He won his case after proving that his demonstration did not obstruct movement. From then on, his protest was considered legal. However, the SOCPA

legislation was designed to remove him, his megaphone and his embarrassing banners from Parliament Square.

But a loophole meant that it did not apply to Haw. He applied for judicial review and the judge ruled that, as Haw's protest started before the act was passed, he could legally continue his protest.

In the early hours of 23 May 2006, 78 policeman arrived and confiscated all but one of Haw's placards, citing continual breaches of the SOCPA legislation as their reason for doing so. Only those placards and personal belongings that can fit in a 3 metre space can remain.

Haw's protest has won him many high-profile supporters including former Labour cabinet minister Tony Benn and comedian Mark Thomas. He was voted most inspiring political figure at the 2006 Channel 4 Political Awards. He won 54% of the vote. Eight per cent backed Tony Blair and six per cent backed David Cameron. In January 2007, Mark Wallinger recreated Brian Haw's Parliament Square protest as an exhibition. It won the Turner Prize.

This week, Mr Haw will be walking from London to Oxford to take part in the Union debate ‘This House Would Under No Circumstances Fight For Queen and Country’.

### What is SOCPA?

- The Serious Organised Crime And Police Act (2005) was enacted in response to perceived threats from organised crime and terrorism.

- It established the Serious Organised Crime Agency – a sort of British FBI.

- It provides for greatly enlarged powers of arrest and requires advance notice in writing to the police for any demonstration in the Westminster area. The area is wide (nearly a kilometre in all directions from Parliament Square); the definition of ‘demonstration’ even wider. If you, knowingly or otherwise: display any political, ideological, or religious material in the area, you can be arrested.

