

Britain's People's Assembly: Marching Against Austerity in London

The 20 June 2015 March

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Image: The People's Assembly in Whitehall. Photo by Lesley Docksey.

It was to be expected, and nothing more clearly illustrated the gap between the uncaring rich and the 99 per cent.

On the day when many thousands of people from across Britain poured into London (and [elsewhere](#)) to demonstrate against the Tory government's austerity measures, high society poured out of London to attend the last day of racing at one of the main events of the summer season for the privileged – [Royal Ascot](#). While coaches, buses, cars and trains decanted protestors, Waterloo Station was awash with top hats and posh frocks waiting to board the Ascot train.

Up to 250,000 people came to London and no one can argue that the demonstration, organised by [The People's Assembly](#), wasn't representative of the broad spectrum of people's anger against Tory policies, policies that have seen vital budget cuts affecting so many people, with the poorest targeted more than most, and the rich not at all. None of the cuts have affected them, their friends the foreign 'investors' who have bought up half of London, or the global corporations. Many international companies pay little tax and make use of "[zero hour contracts](#)" which allow the government to point to the rise in employment while ignoring that such jobs can make people poorer.

Instead of those who need it, tax payers' money will still subsidise the arms trade and [arms deals](#) with dodgy regimes, [nuclear power](#) and underwrite vanity projects such as the unnecessary, unwanted and environmentally damaging [high-speed-train](#) line.

Every major and minor union was there, with many people calling for a General Strike. Tories don't like trade unions and want to curb [their right to strike](#) even more. Give them enough room and they'll outlaw that right or create so many legal hoops for unionists to jump through it will be all but impossible.

All public services were represented. Even those which are supposed to be 'protected' from the cuts are suffering from knock-on effects. Teachers' unions large and small were there, and Christine Blower, head of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) was one of the speakers.

The National Health Service, rightly the pride of the British and envied by the poor across the world for its accessibility to immediate treatment and care, is under threat. Struggling with debts caused by the [Private Finance Initiative](#) deals, and with Tories eager to privatise

as much as they can get away with in order to 'balance the books' (too many Tory MPs have [connections](#) with private healthcare firms), NHS staff are struggling. From surgeons and theatre staff marching in their scrubs to child psychotherapists, nurses, porters – all those who could be there were there.

The Fire Service has had budgets cut and [fire stations closed](#) or 'rationalised'. The London Fire Brigade suffered the [closure](#) of 10 Fire Stations last year with the inevitable redundancies – they came with their fire engine.

Police forces across the country [are facing](#) budget cut and officers made redundant as a result. That could be why the many police on duty were far more friendly than at previous demonstrations – no sign of the 'heavy brigade', dog handlers getting their police dogs to leap at passing marchers or attempts at [kettling](#).

On the other hand, Whitehall (down which the marchers went) and Downing Street (past the entrance of which the marchers walked) were in lockdown. One policeman grinned when asked, "Is he at home – or at the Races?" Well, of course David Cameron wouldn't be there – if he's nothing else, he's gutless.

I have never seen such barricades against demonstrators, even in the days of the invasion of Iraq. Double barriers, chained, weighted and padlocked; even the most important thing in Whitehall, the Cenotaph, memorialising the dead of British wars from WWI onwards, all boarded up because the last time anti-austerity campaigners passed this way, someone [left a rude message](#) on the Women of World War II memorial. Boarded up and guarded by police, the words carved in the stone above them stood out – "The Glorious Dead". Quite.

As they poured through Trafalgar Square into Whitehall, each group roared and cheered as it saw Big Ben ahead – the end of the march from the City (the source of financial woes) to Westminster (the source of all the other woes). The noise echoed all the way down Whitehall as wave after wave of marchers passed.

Anti-racist organisations were there. Pro-immigrant organisations were there. European supporters were there, including Greeks with Syriza placards. The Green Party was out in force, as were all the Socialist and Communist groups. Labour Assembly Against Austerity were there (not all the Labour Party is cowed by the Tories – witness Jeremy Corbyn, standing in the leadership election). No Conservatives though.

The disabled were there, on their crutches and in wheelchairs. Many have suffered from the austerity cuts, being [asked to work](#) when they were incapable, or indeed, already dying from their disabilities. The homeless were there, proudly holding up their placards with their very individual statements scrawled on bits of old cardboard. Anybody and everybody came, all with their own messages, their humour, their anger and their despair:

Historians Against Going Backwards

No Ifs, No Buts, No more Fucking Cuts

We Are Not A Loan!

Economists Against Austerity

Austerity Kills

Social Justice Not Criminal Justice

Peace, freedom, and a fewer fat bastards eating all the pie!

Cameron and Osborne – privately educated thieves

They cut, we bleed

Whoever voted Tory own up – or the whole class stays behind

If there's money to kill people, there's money to help people

So Angry I Made This Sign

Everyone had a story to tell, personal reasons for demonstrating. For one man it was anger over the banks that had caused the financial crisis, and the taxpayers' money that went to bail them out, at a cost of about £55,000 per tax payer. He was angry that George Osborne was proposing [to sell off](#) the publicly-owned part of the Royal Bank of Scotland at a huge loss to the taxpayer. Our money, he said, ours! He had come with his own leaflets on this and other issues (like the NHS and [TTIP](#)) to hand out as he marched.

One London woman said that although she personally had not been affected by the austerity cuts, her local school could not employ good, or indeed, any teachers because there was nowhere in London they could afford to buy or rent a home. Another woman knew a public health worker forced to commute into London every day from the south coast because, again, she could not afford any kind of home in London. But then, she must have been spending a major part of her salary on rail fares.

And from one disabled woman, a story to tear the heart. She had managed to travel up from Kent to join all the other disabled protestors. She said she was willing to say why she was there, but when I asked if she had been affected by the cuts (and remember, George Osborne has another [£12 billion cuts planned](#) for welfare spending) she started to speak, then her face crumpled and she broke down.

What could I do? I put my arms round her and told her not to go on; I had not meant to hurt her so; I wouldn't ask her any more questions. But she said "No, I want to tell you this!" And this is what she told me:

She was living on a knife-edge. Just about surviving the cuts already made to her welfare payments, she was terrified what the next tranche of cuts would do. She didn't know if her family would be able to offer any more help for they too were stretched. "But I have made my plans," she said.

Here was a woman who was intelligent, articulate and caring of other people, who had the misfortune to be confined to a life in a wheelchair. "But I have made my plans," she said.

She described how, as the last 5 years of cuts began to affect disabled people, and her unable to leave her home very often, she spent a lot of time on-line, talking to her fellow sufferers, persuading them to not consider suicide, telling them there was always hope, always a tomorrow. But "I cannot talk to them anymore, I can't tell them not to kill

themselves, I can't tell them to hope. I can't do it anymore. But I have made my plans..."

The government [has refused](#) to make public the figures showing how many people have died after their welfare payments were stopped or slashed. And taxpayers expect their taxes to pay for welfare, for nurses, firemen, 'bobbies' on the beat, dustmen, teachers, carers... Most do not pay taxes simply to provide incomes for politicians who think the poor are a drag on society.

David Cameron, George Osborne, and all you other rich men who 'lead the world' and think money is the only reason for living - may you rot in hell for what you are doing to people like her.

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