

# Armistice Day counter-protests: How UK government rhetoric and police failings could be linked to far-right violence

November 20 2023, by William Allchorn

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Credit: Mike Bird from Pexels

On Armistice Day 2023, a pro-Palestine march was held in London for the fifth time since the beginning of the Israel-Palestine war. As well as

demonstrators looking to join the protest, around 2,000 far-right activists and football hooligans descended on London, too. Their goal, as members of the UK far right put it, was to "[defend](#)" the Cenotaph from the pro-Palestine marchers.

Among their number were the former leader of the [English Defence League](#), Tommy Robinson, along with members of both [Turning Point UK](#) (the British offshoot of the eponymous US organization, that aims to promote right-wing politics in UK education) and the [British Movement](#) group.

Groups of fans from Chelsea, West Ham, and other football clubs joined, too. These counter-protestors rallied at Victoria, Westminster, and Embankment stations before the march set off.

[Violence](#) broke out when the counter-protesters transgressed a cordon around the Cenotaph. They scuffled with police in Chinatown and were rebuffed at Westminster and Vauxhall bridges, where they tried to clash with pro-Palestinian protestors. Nine [police officers](#) were injured, and 92 were detained.

This came after the former home secretary Suella Braverman published a [comment article](#) on November 8, 2023, in the Times in which she characterized the repeated pro-Palestine protests as "problematic" events, mobilizing "tens of thousands of angry demonstrators".

She wrote, "Now as we approach a particularly significant weekend in the life of our nation, one which calls for respect and commemoration, the hate marchers—a phrase I do not resile from—intend to use Armistice Day to parade through London in yet another show of strength."

Many far-right protest events result in relatively little, or only low-level,

[physical violence](#). My [research](#) into policing, policy and the far right shows that while violence isn't inevitable, outbreaks of violence are usually the result of poor choreography and planning on the part of authorities.

## Choreography of protests and counter-protests

Sociology talks about "[situational dynamics](#)". This, sociologist Anne Nassauer explains, refers to "interactions, interpretations, and emotions" of the people taking part, from the moment the situation (here, the protest) begins, to the outcome (here, the violence).

Recent research also shows that [reciprocal radicalisation](#) between activists and any relevant counter-movements can escalate. This can lead to tit-for-tat confrontations and violence.

On November 11, a group of counter-protesters discovered a route through a police line around the Cenotaph. Suddenly they vastly outnumbered the ten police officers.

This is what Nassauer [describes](#) as a "situational breakdown." The activists found themselves able to change the dynamic of power, resulting in what political scientist Sabine C. Carey [describes](#) as an "oppositional dynamic" developing between the counter-protestors and the police. This opposition then [hardened](#) throughout the day.

Beyond what happened on the day itself, the prospect of such a violent escalation was also shaped by what was said before, within far-right spaces or by politicians seeking to politicize Remembrance Day and sow divisions.

## Divisive rhetoric and violence

Braverman's comments had [ratcheted up](#) the [rhetoric](#) being voiced in far-right online forums that weak politicians and police would not sufficiently defend national monuments.

Robinson, meanwhile, posted a video on X (formerly Twitter), [urging](#) his followers to show support for the armed forces by turning up at the Cenotaph. He insisted the goal was "to show that British people aren't happy".

Braverman's comments and Robinson's interventions are likely, in my view, to have added to the momentum needed for violence to erupt on the streets on November 11, 2023.

There is also a more holistic way to view the events that unfolded. Sociologists and [political scientists](#) see violence escalation as an outcome of interactions across multiple [relational fields](#).

That is, first, among activists themselves. And then between activists and a host of counterparts, including counter-movements, security forces, political and cultural elites, and the general public.

The fact that some parallel interests were perceived between the counter-protestors and vocal politicians had an important bearing on the violence that ensued. It led to what can be termed an "[emboldened pathway](#)": far-right activists become and remain more [violence](#)-oriented when the media and highly visible political figures appear to validate their cause.

This is due, in part, to the far-right activists' belief that they enjoy the support of both key political allies and those parts of the public about which they are concerned. We can see this in the [online support](#) the counter-protestors received from football hooligans.

Those charged with maintaining public order did not plan adequately.

This poor choreography meant that [law enforcement](#) was not able to counter the activists' violent intent.

There will likely be more counter-demonstrations if more pro-Palestine demonstrations go ahead. Those in power should take note of how divisive rhetoric can incite violent responses.

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