



# Riot control

Who was to blame for Sunday's clashes following the demonstration against the Criminal Justice Bill? **Tim Malyon** and **Steve Platt** give a first-hand analysis. Pictures by **Paul Mattson**

*Steve Platt is a member of the Coalition Against the Criminal Justice Bill steering committee, which organised Sunday's demonstration. Both he and Tim Malyon were present throughout the clashes that followed the march.*

**A**t first the blood is indistinguishable from the face paint. But as the young man comes closer, it is clear that the red smear down the side of his cheek is from a head wound. He spits out mouthfuls of beer over the lines of riot police facing him, cursing them for the injury caused a few moments before by a flailing truncheon.

"This is what you get for nonviolence," says a man in a mask behind him. "Keep it fluffy!" he sneers, in sarcastic reference to the nonviolent credo of some of the literature advertising the protest. "Tell that to them!" He gestures towards the police lines. A bottle flies overhead as he speaks.

So it happened, what has long been feared—a violent confrontation between anti-Criminal Justice Bill protestors and police. The precise picture remains confused, but one thing on which all sides agree is that the problem started when police tried to stop two sound systems from entering Hyde Park at the end of the march. "If they'd kept the police profile to a minimum, and allowed the sound systems through, there would have been no problem," said Camilla Berens of the Freedom Network. She was there when police brought the sound systems—and the dancing protestors who were accompanying them—to a standstill in Park

Lane. "By stopping the sound systems, they set up a confrontational situation, which provided an ideal scenario for people to get angry. Then the police overreacted and poured in."

Certainly there were a few people on the demonstration who were not averse to trouble when it started, like the group that tried to shout down the speaker from the National Association of Probation Officers and others to whom they took exception. But police tactics were almost guaranteed to give that tiny minority their window for violence—and to draw in much larger numbers of peaceful demonstrators and bystanders who were

caught up in the police charges.

And what was the police operation organised in defence of? Park regulations that forbid music and vehicles. It is not a criminal or arrestable offence to break these bylaws. The maximum fine is £200. Yet that was what the Metropolitan Police insisted on enforcing even though some sort of public disorder was the inevitable consequence of their doing so. It does not augur well for the future. The Criminal Justice Bill gives the police immense discretion in how they act or react. Sunday's example does not suggest the Met will use its discretion wisely.

(Nor legally for that matter. The Met told *NSS* before the march that sound systems would have to stay at the back of the demonstration because mixing with the marchers would be "inherently unsafe", quoting the 1986 Public Order Act as justification. In fact, the police have no powers under this act to make such restrictions on the grounds of safety. Will the Notting Hill carnival be the next target?)

While the Met imposed restrictions on

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sounds systems on the march, the Royal Parks authority refused the march organisers permission to bring systems into the park. They justified their decision thus: "The regulation [against playing music] is there because there are thousands of other people in the park at that time of day. If there's a sound system, it's going to disturb people."

The park authority has become increasingly restrictive in its attitude towards demonstrations. The Campaign Against The Arms Trade, for example, asked for permission to release balloons with anti-arms trade slogans on them recently, and were told they could only do so without the slogans. When asked about allowing music in the park at the Pavarotti concert, the authority replied that this took place at night, so would not disturb other park users. And its spokesman added: "There was a considerable fee involved."

Andrew Puddephatt from Liberty, who spoke at the demonstration, also believes that "the problems were caused by restrictions on access to the park." He says that what happened on Sunday is a clear example of how the Criminal Justice Bill could backfire badly. "Protests need to be facilitated as part of the democratic process. Under the bill, protest will become more and more restricted, so that when it does happen the potential for vio-



**Sunday's demonstration was the scene of some of the worst clashes between demonstrators and police since the poll tax riot in 1990. Among the injured was *NSS* photographer Paul Mattson. He was knocked to the ground during one of the mounted police charges in Hyde Park. As he attempted to get up, he was clubbed over the head and knocked unconscious by a riot police officer. He is currently taking legal advice on mounting a civil action against the police for assault**

lence will be much greater."

Liberty deployed ten legal observers at the demonstration, one of whom, Vincent Seabrook, was seriously assaulted by the police. "I was pushed down on the floor, punched, hit across the back with a truncheon, and then three police were just kicking me and hitting me with truncheons. I was trying to get up, telling them I was a legal observer—the police said they didn't give a damn, and just started laying back into me. It took four people to get them off me. I was in agony. I've just had an operation on my head. I was knocked off my bike, and I've got metal plates in my skull. I told the police, and they just kept hitting me across the head. They were acting like hooligans."

In a press release, Liberty commented that "it would be foolish to pretend that all the demonstrators behaved like angels", but said its observers had witnessed "several apparently unprovoked assaults by police on individuals. They mentioned one incident in particular, which we also observed where "mounted police repeat-



**Billy Power of the Birmingham Six (right) leads the march**

edly charged into a crowd of people who were just standing or sitting around after the rally." It was difficult to ascertain what these mounted police were trying to achieve. A number of people were injured by these charges, conducted at a full gallop across the open spaces of the park, which infuriated a relatively peaceful, but increasingly angry crowd.

It was also difficult to ascertain the purpose of the police in first halting the sound systems in Park Lane, then hemming in the demonstrators who had gathered around them, and finally launching a series of charges that forced an increasingly confused crowd out of Park Lane and Hyde Park and hence into Oxford Street, some of whose shopfronts then became the target for angry protestors.

The police had been repeatedly warned before the demonstration of the potential hazards of not allowing sound systems to play on the march and in Hyde Park. Glenn Jenkins, from the Exodus group in Luton, for example (see *NSS*, 24 June and 5 August), described why, although they were on the two previous marches against the bill, they had decided to leave their system behind for this one.

"We had every intention of bringing a sound system, but we wanted an assurance from the organisers and police that we could bring the sound system and not have conflict keeping it outside the march and the park. Right until Sunday morning we were trying to organise that. But the police were insistent. We need to be spoken to, not treated like aliens. We clearly told the police that this was a potential flashpoint."

Having organised some 60 trouble-free parties, Exodus is now suggesting a demonstration next spring that would involve sound systems up and down the country, both reggae and rave, pledged to nonviolence, with microphones on all the floats to help control the crowd. It could be even bigger, and a lot more fun, than Sunday's policing fiasco. ■