

G20 Police State: Toronto is burning! Or is it?

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Police allowed the violence to happen last night in Toronto and then spent their time spinning it to the media instead of putting out the fires.

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For people sitting at home and watching TV news last night, Toronto was burning. The same police car on Queen St W. burned and blew up over and over again. The same image of a young man very violently smashing Starbucks windows appeared over and over again. Windows smashed all along Yonge St. None of us had ever seen Toronto like this. It was shocking.

Most of the 400 protesters arrested last night and others who may have avoided arrest didn't see that violence. From their perspective, they were facing a violent police state. These demonstrations, militant but overwhelming peaceful, were resisting the right of the police to hold them to Queen Street. They think the people have a right to protest in a place where political leaders can hear them. They had nothing to do with torching police cars or trashing windows.

TVO host Steve Paiken was down at the Novotel last night with peaceful protesters. He [tweeted](#) [3] his experiences, "Shame on those that ordered peaceful protesters attacked and arrested. that is not consistent with democracy in toronto, G20 or no G20."

I was on Queen West and Spadina when the trouble started. David Fernandez has written an excellent report on what happened on his [facebook page](#). [4]

"Rewind to just before the riot happened, thousands of us marched in a very briskly moving group until we hit the intersection of Spadina and Queen. Folks from the labour movement tried in vain to encourage the march to move back up towards queens park, but the mood was clear. Many thousands of protestors were interested in being closer to the summit and letting the police know that we couldn't be intimidated.

But nothing official was planned. Labour walked back up the street leaving thousands to mill about in the confusion of what to do next. And in that confusion, several hundred people changed their clothes and took off together running down queen street while thousands of riot cops picked their noses. In full police view, they let a mob destroy banks and trash Yonge street.

And while riot cops had shields AND bikes and thousands of dollars in body armor to protect them from the remaining peaceful protestors, somehow they were so scared of us that they abandoned police cars."

The police spokesperson told Metro Morning today that they waited until later when it was safer to make arrests but that cannot be true. I was there and like David I believe the cops could have arrested the Black Bloc right at the beginning of the action but they abandoned their police cars and allowed them to burn, not even calling the fire department until the media had lots of time to photograph them. They had a water cannon but they didn't even use a fire extinguisher. Why?

A comment released to a media outlet last night from official police spokesperson tells some of the story, "We have never tried to curtail people's rights to lawfully protest. All you have to do is turn on the TV and see what's happening now. Police cars are getting torched, buildings are being vandalized, people are getting beat up and the so-called 'intimidating' police presence is essential to restoring order. That is the reality on the ground."

Police playing politics, justifying the expense and responding to the critiques building all week about excessive and arbitrary police powers. A politicized police force is unacceptable in a democratic society. There are serious questions that must be answered and they have not been satisfactory answered.

People were shocked last night by a city out of control but the Toronto police — without all the huge expenditures, extra police from across the country and sophisticated new toys — have kept the peace in riots with a lot more people and in hundreds of demonstrations much larger and often angry. I disagree with torching police cars and breaking windows and I have been debating these tactics for decades with people who think they accomplish something. But the bigger question here is why the police let it happen and make no mistake the police did let it happen. Why did the police let the city get out of control? And they did let it get out of control. The police knew exactly what would happen and how.

[Christopher Watt](#) [5] was there when the first police car was torched,

"The officers clustered and formed a line. A second picket of officers lined up behind them, facing the crowd where I stood. They started to move, but they weren't clearing the street; they were clearing out and abandoning two police cars, including the one with the shattered windshield..."

In moments like this, someone needs to make a decision. This time it was a man in dreadlocks and no shirt, red paint all over his torso. He moved towards the police car, grabbing the squawking police radio..."

Following the lead of the dreadlocked man, someone else pulled what looked like a leather folder from inside the car and spread its contents over the trunk. A kid wearing sunglasses, his face covered by a scarf, inspected the paperwork. Soon after, the squad cars would be on fire. (The gas cap appeared to have been removed from one of them even before the crowd moved in.)"

It was a perfect storm. A massive police presence who were primed for "dangerous anarchists" after a week of peaceful protests. No more than one hundred, probably fewer, young men who think violent confrontations with the police will create a radicalization and

expose the violence of the state. A new generation of young people who are becoming activists believing they live in a democratic society and are shocked by the degree of police violence arrayed to stop them.

But it is the police that let the handful of people using Black Bloc tactics run wild and then used the burning police cars and violent images as a media campaign to convince the people of Toronto that the cost and the excessive police presence was necessary. They knew what would happen and they knew [how it would happen](#). [6] It is the police that bear the responsibility for what happened last night. They were responsible for keeping the peace and they failed to do it.

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