

# When the Language of Freedom Dies, Freedom Dies With It

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Region: [Europe](#)

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*Back in March (2015) a UK parliamentary select committee published a report [1] which expounded, amongst other things, its views on the police uploading arrest photographs, including those of people not subsequently convicted, into a facial recognition database. The police started doing this on the quiet, without any public announcement or public debate on their reasons for doing it or its impact on individual freedoms.*

Here is what the Select Committee had to say:

“We fully appreciate the positive impact that facial recognition software could have on the detection and prevention of crime. However, it is troubling that the governance arrangements were not fully considered and implemented prior to the software being ‘switched on’. This appears to be a further example of a lack of oversight by the Government where biometrics is concerned; a situation that could have been avoided had a comprehensive biometrics strategy been developed and published.”

[‘Current and future uses of biometric data and technologies’ report, House of Commons Science and Technology select committee, 2015]

Oh boy, strong words, they must have been pretty annoyed – oh no, hang on a minute – “fully appreciate the positive impact”, “governance arrangements were not fully considered”, “lack of oversight”... There must have been a mistake at the printers, they appear to have accidentally printed a sermon on the merits of doing nothing other than producing yet more administrative red tape.

Is this the best that a committee given the task of holding the government to account can do? Can the committee members only consider the alleged benefits of yet more technology-led policing in abstraction whilst ignoring the real costs in terms of freedoms?

In 1822, before there was an organised professional police force in Britain, a parliamentary select committee considered various suggestions for “facilitating the detection of crimes”. In their report they wrote [2]:

“It is difficult to reconcile an effective system of police, with that perfect freedom of action and exemption from interference, which are the great privileges and blessings of society in this country; and Your [this] Committee think that the forfeiture or curtailment of such advantages would be too great a sacrifice for improvements in police, or facilities in detection of crime, however desirable in themselves if abstractedly considered.”

[‘Report from the Select Committee on the Police of the Metropolis’, 1822]

Or consider the words of an 1818 parliamentary select committee, similarly considering the suggestion of a preventative rather than reactive police force [3]:

“in a free country, or even in one where any unrestrained intercourse of society is admitted, such a system would of necessity be odious and repulsive, and one which no government could be able to carry into execution. ”

[‘Third report from the Committee on the State of the Police of the Metropolis’, 1818]

What happened along the way to turn select committees from defenders of freedom into yes-men for the police and state? Why have politicians so stupendously failed to stand up for what is right?

### **The Death of the Language of Freedom**

In the 19th century, when the committees on the police of the metropolis wrote these reports, there was a richer language of freedoms and liberties. It was common for parliamentarians to use the phrase “unconstitutional” to criticise excesses of the state, so that in effect if some measure or proposal was right it was constitutional and if it was wrong it was unconstitutional. This use of the word constitutional demonstrated that certain core values were considered to be part of the life blood of the people. There were basic concepts of right and wrong that a much larger proportion of the population, compared to today, just got and the values of freedom and liberty permeated through the whole of western society.

This is not to idealise life in the 19th century (neither, for that matter, is this to say that things were worse - in fact there is plenty of evidence to suggest that select committees could be just as bent then as they are now! [4]). This is to explore the sterile and dead language of dissent that mortally constrains modern discourse of matters that affect our freedoms and liberties. It is through language that we communicate and understand concepts such as freedom. When the language of freedom dies, freedom itself dies.

In 1829, despite the above mentioned opposition, a new preventative professional police force was introduced in London and it didn’t take long before they were caught spying on the people. In 1832, Sergeant Popay of the Metropolitan Police, wearing plain clothes and using a false name, joined the Camberwell Branch of the National Political Union and attended meetings at which he urged members to “use stronger language than they did in their resolutions” [5] and generally encouraged violence against the state.

When members of the union discovered Popay’s true identity there was a public outcry and during a debate on the new police of London (the Metropolitan Police) William Cobbett MP presented a petition to parliament “against the system of Police adopted in the Metropolis”. The parliamentary record of that debate shows [6]:

“The Petition stated the abhorrence of the Petitioners at the conduct of Popay, who was a member of that novel and unconstitutional force called the New Police, the members of which were employed as spies, as instigators of mischief, ensnaring, betraying, and coercing the people.”

[‘Metropolitan Police’, House of Commons Debate, 7th August 1833]

Now, in the face of the police uploading photographs of innocent people into a facial recognition database, we merely hear politicians, the media and even campaign groups calling for more “transparency” or “regulation”, “proportionality” and “necessity” – this modern lexicon, or Newspeak, may seem to sound good but you’re never really sure what it’s meant to mean. Is secretly uploading photographs to a facial recognition database a crisis in necessary and proportionate transformational transparency? The language of freedom is dead, and unless we resurrect it...

“Newspeak was designed not to extend but to DIMINISH the range of thought, and this purpose was indirectly assisted by cutting the choice of words down to a minimum.”

[George Orwell, ‘1984’, Appendix]

1984 Action Day, 8th June is the anniversary of the publication of George Orwell’s novel ‘1984’ and is an opportunity for people to raise awareness of the many threats to our liberties and freedoms.

For more info about 1984 Action Day see:

- [www.no-cctv.org.uk/1984.asp](http://www.no-cctv.org.uk/1984.asp)
- [1984actionday.wordpress.com](http://1984actionday.wordpress.com)
- [www.iwgvs.org](http://www.iwgvs.org)

#### Notes:

1. ‘Current and future uses of biometric data and technologies’, 6th Report of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, HC 734, paragraph 100, page 33  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmsctech/734/734.pdf>
2. ‘Report from the Select Committee on the Police of the Metropolis.’ (1822) P.P. (440) IV.91, page 11
3. ‘Third report from the Committee on the State of the Police of the Metropolis’ (1818) P.P. (423) VII.1, page 32
4. See for instance ‘The police spy, or The Metropolitan Police; its advantages, abuses, and defects’, Captain W White 1838, p21
5. ‘Employment of Spies’, House of Commons Debate, 27th June 1833, vol 18 cc1254-63  
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1833/jun/27/employment-of-spies>
6. Petition from the National Political Union of Newcastle-on-Tyne, ‘Metropolitan Police’, House of Commons Debate, 7th August 1833, vol 20 cc404-8  
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1833/aug/07/metropolitan-police>

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