

“Government must depend for its Efficiency either on Force or Opinion.” From ‘The Colonist’s Advocate’, VII. (Feb 1, 1770)

The government that Benjamin Franklin wrote about in his series of *Colonist’s Advocate* essays is very different to the government that runs the UK today, but his assertion that “government must depend for its Efficiency either on Force or Opinion” stills holds value, because when Franklin writes about government, he also writes about the fundamentals of power. Be favoured, or be feared.

When we in the UK imagine the role of opinion in the running of our government, we may think about public opinion and the number of votes in a ballot box. The thing is, our democracy isn’t as straightforward as that. Government a heaving, hulking machine. No one – not even those at the top – has complete oversight over everything. Opinion takes on different forms. Tony Blair, ahead of Labour’s victory in 1997, [won media favour](#) by wooing the right people. Decades later, in the 2019 election, the Conservative party had [£27 million more](#) in financial resources than Labour at their disposal during campaigning. Force, too, seeps into our politics in small ways: there’s a reason why the person who ensures that politicians vote in line with party policy is called a whip. Still, Franklin’s argument isn’t an oversimplification. A generous donation from a wealthy supporter: that’s opinion. An MP voting against her conscience for fear of losing a cabinet position: that’s force.

Franklin’s *The Colonist’s Advocate* essays were written in response to the Townshend Acts, a set of taxes imposed by the British government on certain goods in the North American colonies. While the Acts passed through British Parliament easily, they were deeply unpopular among the American colonists, who saw the taxes as another imposition on their freedom. Franklin wrote eleven essays in the first quarter of 1770 to lobby for the repeal of the Acts, in an attempt to sway British opinion.

Other colonists turned to more direct methods to express their contempt for the Acts. Many boycotted the taxed goods and harassed British officials. Tensions on the East Coast gradually grew. Regiments from the British army arrived in Boston to quell the mounting resistance, but the military presence only stoked further discontent. Fights broke out between soldiers and locals. In February 1770, an eleven-year-old boy was killed in skirmish between factionalised colonists. It was against this context that Franklin wrote that a free government relies on opinion, “not on the brutal Force of a Standing Army”. His words were prescient: two months after his essay was published, five people were killed in the Boston Massacre when British soldiers shot into a crowd.

The story of the Townshend Acts is a story of civil disobedience and ruling force. It’s a story that runs parallel to one unfolding in the UK today between climate protesters and the Conservative government.

Over the last two years, the British government has introduced several policies aimed at limiting public demonstrations. While the new laws have consequences for all protests, the government [explicitly cited](#) actions by climate groups Just Stop Oil and Insulate Britain as a justification for the measures.

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act — also known as the Policing Act — came into force in April 2022. The Act gives the police power to shut down protests if it causes “serious disruption to the life of the community”. What precisely amounts to “serious disruption” is open to interpretation. The Act also gives ministers the ability to amend or expand the definitions of “serious disruption to the life of the community” and “serious disruption to the activities of an organisation” without going through the full parliamentary debate process.

A year later, the government introduced the Public Order Act, which introduced criminal offences for locking-on, obstructing major transport networks and interfering with key national infrastructure. The Act was used to charge Just Stop Oil protestors in November 2023 for blocking a road in London.

Just Stop Oil are unpopular: British voters oppose their demonstrations [by a margin of 64 to 21](#). Their choice of actions – namely, locking on to transport infrastructure, blocking roads and throwing soup at paintings – has resulted in a flurry of newspaper columns and pithy posts on social media along the lines of ‘I support their cause, but...’. Still, we cannot let opinion on methodology become too entangled with an apathy around the increasing use of force to combat protest.

The Boston Massacre did not take place because the British government wrote laws that gave soldiers explicit instructions to shoot into crowds of protestors. While conspiracy theorists delight in stories about a powerful elite carefully crafting the demolition of a free and fair society, the truth is that the world is much more chaotic than we realise. The unravelling of freedom is haphazard. It’s something that happens when people aren’t looking. An event like the Boston Massacre occurs because communication isn’t clear, confusion takes over, emotions run high. These events also happen when those in power leave loose ends in the legislation. Vague and interpretable laws are powerful.

Franklin imagines opinion and force as distinct entities: he wrote that government must depend on “either” one or the other. I think, instead, that opinion and force continually interact with each other. The use of force in the Boston Massacre, for instance, further stoked up anti-British sentiments in the North American colonies – in other words, it shifted opinion. Today, though, I worry that the use of force won’t change opinion at all.

Our politics is, contradictingly, both more polarised and more apathetic than ever. In March, the UK was [downgraded in an annual global index of civic freedoms](#). I don’t remember hearing this news at the time. It must have passed me by: it must have passed everyone by.

We should be wary of throwing around phrases like “authoritarian turn”. Words lose their meaning when they are misused, and an obsession with calling people in British politics who we disagree with authoritarian blinds us to much more serious abuses of power elsewhere in the world. However, Franklin is clear: a government that depends on force is not free.