

## Written evidence from WASPI (Women Against State Pension Injustice) (PCS0042)

I write on behalf of the WASPI (Women Against State Pension Injustice) Campaign 2018 in respect of the call for evidence by the Joint Committee on Human Rights regarding the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. We are a grassroots, voluntary-run campaign group that fights the injustice imposed upon women born in the 1950s affected by the inadequate notice of the changes to our State Pension Age. Our aim is to achieve “fair transitional state pension arrangements and recompense for all women born in the 1950s affected by the changes to the state pension law (1995/2011 Acts)”. Please see <https://www.waspicampaign2018.co.uk/> for more about us

We wish to make the following comments:

### 1. Are the proposed changes to the law governing public assemblies, processions and one person protests necessary to protect those adversely affected by such activities?



It is a fact that the democratic rights to protest, to free speech and free assembly may inconvenience people. A protest is designed to catch people’s attention in order to raise awareness of groups that feel unjustly treated by Governments or other institutions or organisations. We cannot raise awareness of injustice by, for example, standing quietly in a field, away from the public view! The majority of people understand that on very rare

occasions they may be inconvenienced as a result of living in a democratic society because of our right to protest, our right to free speech and our right to free assembly.

This Bill passes the decision to the police to say where we can protest, how we can protest, how long we can protest for and when we can protest. Recently we have seen apparently aggressive treatment of women by the police in the vigil for Sarah Everard, the Black Lives Matter protestors and the suppression of the two-person protest about the dreadful conditions at the Napier Barracks. Many people believe that there is discrimination by the police with regard to race/women/minority groups which may well be based on their personal or institutional views. Trust in the police has

also been undermined by several reported cases of male police officers committing violence against women.

We have seen how the various police forces across the country respond very differently and what may be considered unlawful in one part of the country may be deemed perfectly lawful in another because of the subjective judgements allowed by the Bill and the dependence upon local police views. Given the declining numbers of police under this Government, decisions about protests could be taken on the basis of police numbers, and any other local or national issues at the time. This Bill sets a very dangerous precedent in terms of our democracy. It is also unfair to the police.

There are already perfectly adequate laws in place to deal with rioting, which is a very different activity from peaceful protests. We do not condone violence in any way. Looking back in history, this nation would be a very different place today had there been laws to suppress freedom of speech, free assembly and the right to protest.



These freedoms demonstrate democracy within society. However, this Government is clearly trying to change that, as they are also planning to take away our rights to challenge unlawful decisions and laws by restricting access to Judicial Review. The Government seems to be proposing discrimination in all forms with the laws that they are trying to introduce; towards women, Black people, immigrants, ethnic minorities, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. They must not be allowed to proceed in the direction that they are taking us.

## **2. Do the proposals in Part 3 of the Bill adequately protect the right to peaceful assembly and the right to free expression?**

WASPI groups throughout the UK have held peaceful, but often noisy, demonstrations and other protests over the past years, as have other groups and campaigns for thoroughly just causes. This Bill will prohibit our democratic right to voice our concerns about the callous, unjust treatment of women born in the 1950s with regard to increasing our state pension age without adequate notice. Our protests have raised awareness for women (and their husbands/partners who have also suffered financially as a result of the changes) who were affected, often unknowingly. As a result of our

protests, we have met and provided support to women with guidance and advice for those who were seriously financially disadvantaged by the changes in the law and who have suffered mentally and physically. Many members of the public were also previously unaware of the issues relating to WASPI women and have expressed their concern and support.

According to the detail in the Bill, if during a protest we inconvenience anyone in any way, for example if we are too noisy, visible on public roads or paths, if we cause disruption to the activities of an organisation in the vicinity of a public assembly, cause disruption to the life of the community, or cause ‘annoyance’ to a member or members of the community, we can be detained by the police and prosecuted for doing so and fined or imprisoned or both.

In a democratic society, this is completely and absolutely unacceptable.



In the case of our protests held in 2019 we obtained advice from the police and they provided us with a case number to be used for our own protection should there be anyone acting aggressively towards us during the protest. We were careful to avoid obstructing pedestrians or drivers, whilst ensuring that our activity was safe. We took action to reduce the risk of accidents to ourselves and others. During our

protest we made noise by shouting, blowing whistles and chanting, we gave out information leaflets to people who showed an interest and we held a banner asking for support from motorists by hooting their horns etc – all normal peaceful activity during a protest. One person, who was working in the building behind us, complained and told us to stop protesting outside their building and told us to move away. Had this Bill been introduced, the one complainant would have been able to call the police on the basis of the criteria contained in the Bill ie causing an ‘annoyance’. The protest would then have met the criteria in the proposed Bill for being unlawful. We could have been prosecuted and received a prison sentence, or a fine, or both if we had refused to stop protesting, depending upon the attitude of the police.

There is absolutely no way that we can predict what the public’s response will be to a protest, or what the police will deem to be lawful in the future. Our democratic right to protest, to free speech

and to free assembly will no longer be an option for us because of the subjective nature of this part of the Bill.

Martin Luther King said: “A riot is the language of the unheard”. If people are unable to protest peacefully, it is likely that more riots will occur, with serious injury, possible death, and damage to buildings and property. It is unfair to the people of this nation, and to the police, who would be required to enforce these aspects of the Bill.

### **In Conclusion:**

**In response to point 1:** The law already protects those that are adversely affected by the right to protest, the right to free speech or the right to free assembly. Changes are not needed. In a democracy these activities are every individual’s democratic right.

**In response to point 2:** This proposal should not be implemented because it does not adequately protect the right to protest, freedom of speech or our right to free assembly.

*25/04/2021*