

Activity Sheet 1.6

Interview 2 (part 2)

Mark Pugash is the Press Officer for the Kent Police

Freedom of Speech

The police have been criticised by some people for ‘defending’ the right of the National Front (NF) to march in Dover. Mark’s comments on this are:

‘Provided you, as an organisation, are not breaking the law you have a right to march. It’s not up to the police to approve or disapprove of what people believe. Because you may disagree with someone’s opinions you don’t have the right to deprive people of their freedom of speech. It’s easy to agree with freedom of speech when you agree with what people are saying. The real test of freedom is when you accept people can say things you disagree with. Being offensive is not the same as being illegal; if you break the law we arrest you.

‘We have to balance people’s freedom of speech with the need to keep order and avoid violence so we may limit the number of people who are allowed on a march, where they are allowed to march, how far they can go and what their signs and placards are made of (to make sure they can’t be used as weapons). We monitor what the NF’s signs and leaflets say. If they are illegal then we will confiscate them but I can’t ever remember doing that because they know the law and they make sure that they are not illegal.

‘At one march we arrested some of the anti-fascist protestors because of the way they were protesting but we always try to apply the law fairly. A good example of this was when we were criticised for protecting an (alleged) member of Combat 18 (a far-right group). He had received death threats and was worried for his family’s safety. We were criticised for wasting money on protecting fascists but when one of our main critics received death threats herself we gave her exactly the same level of protection.

Kent’s approach

‘We have taken a very active role – working with the press and community leaders to reduce tension. There hasn’t been a significant increase in crime and Kent is now being looked at as a model. Other police forces are asking us for advice, preparing for new arrivals of asylum seekers when the government’s dispersal scheme comes into force.’

Why do the police allow the NF to march?

Is it right that people in a democracy should be able to say whatever they want?

What would happen if the police didn’t take any action at all and just said it was none of their business?

How would you feel if you were a police officer who had to control one of these marches?

What might you think of the police if you were an anti-fascist campaigner trying to stop the NF from marching in the first place?