

BRITAIN'S FUTURE

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NO RACE TO THE BOTTOM:

AVOIDING FURTHER CURBS TO FREEDOM
OF SPEECH UNDER LABOUR

No Race to the Bottom: Avoiding Further Curbs to Freedom of Speech Under Labour

The aftermath of the 2024 General Election has seen a litany of reports alleging abuse and intimidation of MPs by Pro-Palestine members of the public¹. Needless to say, threatening those who are peacefully engaged in the democratic process - whether as voters or prospective candidates for office - with the aim of influencing electoral outcomes is antithetical to democracy, and must be roundly condemned. However, there is a significant distinction between using coercion to force others to capitulate to political views on one hand, and exercising the inalienable democratic right to criticise and hold politicians and political parties to account for their failure to live up to the expectations of voters on the other. Alarmingly however, in recent years the line between the two appears to have been intentionally blurred by actors who wish to immunise the status quo from critique, protect the powerful and muzzle the right of the British people to hold them to account. The shift toward this quasi-authoritarianism became distinctly noticeable under the Conservative Party, with them passing a raft of draconian policies that narrowed the parameters of acceptable public speech and protest ². In Government, Labour should put a stop to the trend. The numerous reports of Labour MPs, including senior cabinet officials, allegedly being subject to intimidation, must not be seized upon to further restrict the right of the voting public to passionately express their views over issues like Israel's genocide in Gaza.

While such allegations are the subject of further investigation ³ by the Electoral Commission, there is the risk that this 'intimidation narrative' is being used as part of an ongoing effort to smear Gaza solidarity activists as "extremists," "Islamists" and their protests as "hate marches." The Labour Party contested the election amidst simmering public anger over Israel's genocide in Gaza, and the refusal of British politicians to properly condemn it and enact sanctions against Tel Aviv. Keir Starmer's now infamous October 2023 remarks to LBC News that Israel had "the right "to cut off water and power into Gaza⁴, followed by similar comments by his senior shadow cabinet officials⁵, decisively pushed many in traditional Labour-voting Muslim-majority

1 Henry Moore, LBC News, 'Home Secretary to Probe 'Disgraceful' Election Intimidation, as Jo Cox's Sister Says UK Politics 'Not in a Good Place.' July 15, 2025, accessed July 16, 2024, available at:

https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/home-office-to-investigate-intimidation-at-general-election-yvette-cooper/

Eleanor Lawson, BBC News, 'Female MPs Call Harassment an Assault on Democracy.' July 5, 2024 accessed July 15, 2024, available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4ng3j1pnpqo

2 Ellie NG, The Independent, 'Demonstrators 'Draconian' and 'Authoritarian' Protest Laws, May 27 2023, accessed July 15, 2024, available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/graham-smith-parliament-square-protesters-republic-speeches-b2347087. html

Ollie Sprague, Amnesty International, 'The Public Order Bill: Explained,' April 26, 2023, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/campaigns-blog/public-order-bill-explained

- 3 BBC News, 'Abuse Put People off Campaigning, Says Vote Watchdog,' July 16, 2024, accessed July 2024, 2024, available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cd104l1k3830
- 4 Asher McShane, LBC News, 'Israel 'Has the Right' to Withhold Power and Water from Gaza, Says Keir Starmer," October 11, 2023, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/sir-keir-starmer-hamas-terrorism-israel-defend-itself/
- 5 Sky News, 'Israel-Gaza War: Forcing Gazans South Must be Done 'According to international Law' says David Lammy, October 15, 2023, accessed July 12, 2024, available at: https://news.sky.com/video/israel-gaza-war-forcing-gazans-south-must-be-done-according-to-international-law-says-david-lammy-12984814

BBC Newsnight X, "Why won't you answer?" - @vicderbyshire asks Labour's Shadow Attorney General Emily Thornberry if Israel cutting off power and supplies to Gaza is in line with international law,' October 12, 2023, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://x.com/BBCNewsnight/status/1712401412120879271?lang=en

constituencies toward independent MPs who ran for Parliament on Gaza solidarity platforms⁶. It was the local, grassroots campaigns to support these independents - five of whom ended up being elected - against Labour MPs that was accused by some of using tactics of intimidation.

In response to these alleged incidents, Labour Home Secretary Yvette Cooper announced she would hold a meeting of the UK government's Defending Democracy Taskforce. Ms Cooper has said that the task force would meet to "make sure public safety, security and standards in our democracy can be upheld". This of course sounds completely reasonable. However, there is a danger that this narrative is being used to discredit those independent MPs who ran on a platform that sought to hold mainstream parties to account for their complicity in Israel's genocide. In fact, the attempted demonisation of these candidates - much of which has been laced by barely disguised Islamophobia - has continued into the post-election period. For example, in one of Labour's biggest electoral upsets, Leicester South's former MP Jonathan Ashworth was toppled by independent Muslim MP Shockat Adam. Ashworth has since tried to smear Adam's reputation by spuriously alleging on social media that he has ties to extremists, later deleting his post once he was cautioned by Adam's lawyers 8. However, the even greater danger is that these incidents will be used to further police the right to freely express ones views over issues like Palestine.

Any such development would fit within a disturbing pattern that has emerged in recent years whereby the political establishment has taken an authoritarian turn toward dissent, and has looked for ways to shield elected representatives and private interests from facing the scrutiny of the public who elected them through restrictions on the right to protest and threats to designate mainstream civil society groups as 'extremist'9. One of the main avenues used by the government to give the stamp of legitimacy to such regressive policies has been the commissioning of what are presented as 'independent' reports from 'experts', especially on the subject of political extremism. Far from being independent, often the individuals commissioned to carry out these reports appear to be cherry-picked by the government because they share its positions on the given issue, as is often reflected in their conclusions. Worse still, these figures sometimes represent private interests that clearly conflict with their role as public servants.

One key example is John Woodcock, also known as Lord Walney, who will be involved in Yvette Cooper's upcoming task force meeting as the government's adviser on political violence and disruption ¹⁰. Mr Woodcock is an obscure figure who shot into the news in May 2024 following the release of his highly controversial report commissioned by the Conservative government, titled *Protecting our Democracy from Coercion* ¹¹. Mr Woodcock was elected as a

⁶ Lewis Baston, Hyphen, 'The Impact of Muslim Voters at the 2024 Election was Even Bigger Than you Think', July 6, 2024, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://hyphenonline.com/2024/07/06/the-impact-of-muslim-voters-at-the-2024-election-was-even-bigger-than-you-think-apsana-begum-shabana-mahmood-birmingham-perry-barr-blackburn-leicester-dewsbury-uk-election/

⁷ Rajeev Syal, The Guardian, 'Yvette Cooper Says 'Disgraceful Scenes' of Election Candidate Abuse Must End,' July 15, 2024, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/15/yvette-cooper-disgrace-ful-scenes-election-campaign-abuse-intimidation-harassment-candidates-mps

⁸ Middle East Eye, 'Ousted Labour Politician Jonathan Ashworth Deletes Post Attacking Pro-Gaza MP,' July 15, 2024, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/ousted-labour-jonathan-ashworth-deletes-post-attacking-pro-gaza-mp

⁹ Paul Seddon and Dominic Casciani, BBC News, 'Michael Gove names groups as he unveils extremism definition,' March 14, 2024, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68564577

¹⁰ Rajeev Syal, The Guardian, 'Yvette Cooper Says 'Disgraceful Scenes' of Election Candidate Abuse Must End,' July 15, 2024, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/15/yvette-cooper-disgraceful-scenes-election-campaign-abuse-intimidation-harassment-candidates-mps

¹¹ Lord Walney, 'Protecting our Democracy from Coercion,' May 21, 2024, accessed May 28, 2024, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66462426b7249a4c6e9d3687/E03131940_HC_775_Walney_Review_v02_PRINT.pdf

Labour MP in 2010 and served brief periods in shadow cabinet roles. However, he was forced to unceremoniously resign in 2018 following sexual harassment allegations ¹². Woodcock's ideological leanings were revealed in the the 2019 General Election when he called for people to vote Conservative in order to block then-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn from becoming Prime Minister, who he argued was a national security threat ¹³. That same year, Prime Minister Boris Johnson rewarded Woodcock with a peerage, following which Johnson then appointed him as a government adviser on political violence ¹⁴. As some have pointed out this was a strange choice considering that Woodcock, "appeared to have a scant background in anything to do with the subject he was now tasked with advising on" ¹⁵.

Mr Woodcock has highly dubious vested interests that raise serious questions about his fitness to be advising the government on matters of civil society, especially when it comes to protests around Israel-Palestine. Firstly, he has deep and enduring ties with the pro-Israel lobby. From 2011 he chaired Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) for about two years, during which time he made trips to Israel reportedly funded by entities like the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs ¹⁶. Reports claim that Mr Woodcock has continued to receive funding from the Israel lobby during the Gaza genocide and made another trip there in January 2024 ¹⁷. The latter trip was said to be organised by the European Leadership Network, an organisation whose founding purpose is to encourage closer strategic ties between Europe and Israel ¹⁸. Secondly, Mr Woodcock has intimate links to the fossil fuel industry and arms manufacturers. Even a cursory look at Woodcock's entries on the Lord's register ¹⁹ shows that he is a paid adviser to Rud Pederson Public Affairs, a corporate lobbying firm that represents fossil fuel giants like BP and coal mining groups like Enwell Energy ²⁰. Campaign groups have also shown that Woodcock chaired the Purpose Defence Coalition, whose membership includes Leonardo, one of the biggest arms manufacturers in the world which also has deep links to the Israeli military ²¹.

These ties are especially concerning when we consider Woodcock's May 2024 report, which calls for the imposition of what are undoubtably anti-democratic restrictions upon the right to criticise government policies through popular protest. While Woodcock does mention a number of far-right groups in his report as being threats to public safety, it is clear that his real targets are Gaza solidarity and climate justice groups, who are given far more focus than

¹² Heather Stewart, The Guardian, 'Corbyn Allies Discussed How to 'Deal With' John Woodcock Before Election,' July 18, 2018, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jul/18/corbyn-allies-discussed-how-to-deal-with-john-woodcock-before-election

¹³ Rowena Mason, The Guardian, 'Two Former Labour MPs Urge Voters to Back Boris Johnson,' November 7, 2019, accessed July 15, 2024, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/07/former-labour-mp-ian-austin-urges-voters-back-boris-johnson

¹⁴ Alan Rusbridger, Prospect, 'Lord Walney' Shows How Easily Illiberalism can Become an Obsession,' May 25, 2024, accessed July 13, 2024, available at: https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/66431/lord-walney-john-woodcock-political-protest-al-an-rusbridger

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John McEvoy, Declassified UK, 'UK Extremism Advisor Has Been Funded by Israel Lobby,' March 5, 2024, available at: https://www.declassifieduk.org/uk-extremism-adviser-has-been-funded-by-israel-lobby/

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid 19 Ibid

¹⁹ UK Parliament MPs and Lords, 'Lord Walney: Registered Interests,' accessed July 15, 2024, available at: https://members.parliament.uk/member/3917/registeredinterests

²⁰ Damien Gayle, The Guardian, 'UK Government Adviser on Disruptive Protest Accused of Conflict of Interest,' May 17, 2024, accessed July 15, 2024, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/17/government-adviser-on-disruptive-protest-accused-of-conflict-of-interest

²¹ Josiah Mortimer, Byline Times, 'Government 'Independent Adviser' Who 'Backs Ban' on Climate and Palestine Groups has Paid Roles with Defence and Business Lobbyists,' May 17, 2024, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://bylinetimes.com/2024/05/17/government-independent-advisor-who-backs-ban-on-climate-and-palestine-groups-has-paid-roles-with-defence-and-business-lobbyists/

far-right groups ²². Indeed, Woodcock has made no secret of his disdain for such organisations, publicly calling for MPs to be banned from engaging with them ²³. Palestine Action, Friends of Al-Aqsa, 5Pillars, Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion, along with a range of what he calls "far-left" groups, are all explicitly named in his report. Despite his attempt to vilify them, it is Woodcock's opposition to these groups that is out of sync with British public opinion. For example, the aforementioned Gaza solidarity groups have pushed for a ceasefire in Gaza and an arms embargo on Israel, both of which are broadly supported by the British public ²⁴.

Woodcock has also called for an investigation into what he characterised as "a concerted campaign by extremists" to intimidate MPs during the election. This is of course an insult to those independent MPs he is referencing and the tens of thousands of voters who supported them. Such language is reminiscent that of former Home Secretary Suella Braverman who called Gaza solidarity protests "hate marches" ²⁵

Alarmingly, Woodcock's report advises the government to treat such groups similarly to terrorist organisations by assessing their ideologies and tactics and deciding whether they should be deemed "extreme" ²⁶ and "disruptive" ²⁷, which if they are could see them face outright bans ²⁸. Even if protestors belonging to such groups are not found to have committed any criminal offence, they can still face punishment for simply belonging to the group in question ²⁹. As per his recommendations, ministers should consider creating new legislative mechanisms that would, among other things, give police increased powers to ban protests and force protest organisers to pay for the costs of policing under amendments to the already controversial Public Order Act ³⁰. He also says that businesses targeted by protestors - such as weapons ²² Lord Walney, 'Protecting our Democracy from Coercion,' May 21, 2024, pp.25-37, accessed May 28, 2024, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66462426b7249a4c6e9d3687/E03131940_HC_775_Walney_Review_v02_PRINT.pdf

Not Hoffman, The Sun, 'Far-Left Protestors Post Threat to Britain's Democracy, Says Top Extremism Adviser,' May 21, 2024, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/28055364/lord-walney-far-left-threat-report/

Duncan Gardham, Sky News, 'Police Urged to Pay More Attention to 'Extreme Left-Wing' Protesters,' May 21, 2024, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://news.sky.com/story/police-urged-to-pay-more-attention-to-extreme-left-wing-protesters-13140819

Will Hazell, The Telegraph, 'Give Police Powers to Ban Pro-Palestinian Protests, Review to Urge,' November 11, 2023, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/11/11/give-police-powers-ban-pro-palestinian-protests-review/

- 23 Lord Walney, The Sun, 'We Must Stop Thugs Threatening Democracy and Ban MPs Working With Groups Behind Palestine Marches,' March 2, 2024, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/politics/26316330/lord-walney-ban-mps-palestine-marches-work/
- 24 For example, a May 2024 YouGov poll shows that 69% of Brits said they think there should be a ceasefire in Gaza, and 56% support an arms embargo on Israel. See Matthew Smith, 'British Attitude to the Israel-Gaza Conflict: May 2024 Update': https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/49366-british-attitudes-to-the-israel-gaza-conflict-may-2024-update
- 25 Kate Devlin, 'MP Lives Endangered by a 'Concerted Campaign' by Extremists,' UK Political Violence Advisor Warns,' Monday 15 July 2024, accessed July 23, 2024, available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-mp-inquiry-yvette-coo-per-political-violence-b2579843.html
- 26 He defines extreme protest groups as, "a protest movement ... whose activities demonstrate active opposition to democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs." See Lord Walney, 'Protecting our Democracy from Coercion,' May 21, 2024, p.21, accessed May 28, 2024, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66462426b7249a4c6e9d3687/E03131940_HC_775_Walney_Review_v02_PRINT.pdf
- 27 He defines disruption as, "the interference in people's everyday lives and the ordinary operations of an organisation or business." See Lord Walney, 'Protecting our Democracy from Coercion,' May 21, 2024, p.22, accessed May 28, 2024, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66462426b7249a4c6e9d3687/E03131940_HC_775_Walney_Review_v02_PRINT.pdf
- 28 Harry Farley, BBC News, 'Extreme Protest Groups Face Ban Under Proposal,' May 12, 2024, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2qv7425gvwo
- 29 Steve Hopkins, Byline Times, 'Lawyer Explains How Lord Walney's 'Extreme Protest' Groups Report Makes 'Criminal Law Redundant and is Draconian and Dangerous,' May 20, 2024, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://bylinetimes.com/2024/05/20/lawyer-explains-how-lord-walneys-extreme-protest-groups-report-makes-criminal-law-redundant-and-is-draconian-and-dangerous/
- 30 Lord Walney, 'Protecting our Democracy from Coercion,' May 21, 2024, pp.284-290, accessed May 28, 2024, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66462426b7249a4c6e9d3687/E03131940_HC_775_Walney_Review_v02_PRINT.pdf

producers - should be able to pursue financial damages if their operations are disrupted ³¹. Additionally, the constituency surgeries of MPs and council chambers should be protected under an expanded Public Space Protection Order, which could essentially banish members of the public from protesting in these areas and holding elected representatives to account by questioning government and/or party policies ³².

Condemnation of the anti-democratic nature of many of Woodcock's report was widespread. For example, Labour MP for Norwich South, Clive Lewis, argued in parliament that it "undermined" the "protection of democracy" and that its conclusions were "frankly ludicrous" ³³. The well-respected publication, Prospect Magazine, accused Woodcock of a "disturbing lack of perspective," ³⁴ while some lawyers cautioned that his ill-defined concept of "extreme protest groups" was "draconian and dangerous" ³⁵. For others, the report simply posed "a threat to democracy" ³⁶. Considering his background of vested interests in the arms and energy industries as well as the pro-Israel lobby, the notion that Mr Woodcock could be seen as an 'independent' adviser makes a mockery of the common sense of the British taxpayer. Indeed, if his report's recommendations were to be seriously entertained by the Labour government, this would pose a great danger to our democratic right to freedom of speech and assembly.

Yet, Mr Woodcock did not strike the first note of the authoritarian mood music that has been growing louder in British politics in recent years - he simply added to it. For example, in March 2024 the Conservative government informed parliament that it was considering mainstream Muslim civil society groups known to be critical of the failed Prevent strategy against a new definition of extremism ³⁷. Initial reports suggested that they were also planning to place climate justice groups on the same list. The same month, Dame Sara Khan's review into *Threats to Social Cohesion and Democratic Resilience* was published, which also essentially makes the case in practice for imposing heavier restrictions upon the right to protest³⁸. As mentioned above, sweeping new powers to control that right have also been enacted in recent years. Take, for example, the recently enacted Public Order Act³⁹, which equips the Government with new powers⁴⁰ to restrict the right to peaceful protest, including what it calls "slow walking tactics." Individuals may be subject to a "protest banning order", which will then see them barred from enjoining others to protest for a given cause. The act was condemned as undemocratic by a roster of officials, including UN officials ⁴¹ and even Conservative Party peers⁴².

- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Clive Lewis, 'In Parliament: The Walney Report on Political Violence Undermines our Rights,' May 22, 2024, accessed July 12, 2024, available at: https://www.clivelewis.org/uncategorised/news-and-updates/2024/05/22/in-parliament-the-walney-report-on-political-violence-undermines-our-rights/
- 34 Alan Rusbridger, Prospect, 'Lord Walney' Shows How Easily Illiberalism can Become an Obsession,' May 25, 2024, accessed July 13, 2024, available at: https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/66431/lord-walney-john-woodcock-political-protest-alan-rusbridger
- 35 Steve Hopkins, Byline Times, 'Lawyer Explains How Lord Walney's 'Extreme Protest' Groups Report Makes 'Criminal Law Redundant and is Draconian and Dangerous,' May 20, 2024, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://bylinetimes.com/2024/05/20/lawyer-ex-plains-how-lord-walneys-extreme-protest-groups-report-makes-criminal-law-redundant-and-is-draconian-and-dangerous/
- 36 Ronja Heymann, Tribune, 'The Walney Report Is a Threat to Democracy,' May 25, 2024, accessed July 14, 2024, available at: https://the-walney-report-is-a-threat-to-democracy
- 37 Sam Francis, BBC News, 'New Extremism Definition Unveiled by Government,' March 14, 2024, accessed July 15, 2024, available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68556914
- 38 Dame Sara Khan, 'Threats to Social Cohesion And Democratic Resilience: A New Strategic Approach,' March 2024, accessed May 12, 2024, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65fdbfd265ca2ffef17da79c/The_Khan_review.pdf
- 39 Liberty, 'Public Order Bill Explainer: What Happened in The Lords and What Happens Next,' February 16, 2023, accessed July 17, 2024, available at: https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/public-order-bill-explainer-what-happened-in-the-lords-and-what-happens-next/
- 40 Ollie Sprague, Amnesty International, 'The Public Order Bill: Explained,' April 26, 2023, accessed July 16, 2024, available at: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/campaigns-blog/public-order-bill-explained
- 41 United Nations Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights Press Office, 'UN Human Rights Chief Urges UK to Reverse 'Deeply Troubling' Public Order Bill, April 27, 2023, accessed July 18, 2024, available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/04/un-human-rights-chief-urges-uk-reverse-deeply-troubling-public-order-bill

The danger then is that the post-General Election 'intimidation narrative' will be used to further crack down on free speech by drawing from the recommendations of people like Mr Woodcock, who remains in his post as government adviser on political violence and disruption and has Tweeted approvingly of Yvette Cooper's task force meeting 43. There is particular concern around whether this narrative is being used to pave the way for more severe crackdowns on Gaza solidarity protests. Such anxieties have only been exacerbated by reports claiming that around half of Keir Starmer's cabinet ministers (13 out of 25) have received donations from pro-Israel lobbying groups, including deputy prime minister Angela Rayner, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper and the Prime Minister himself 44. In order to avoid any ambiguity on the matter, the government should publicly recommit itself to the sacrosanct democratic principles of freedom of speech and assembly, as they are enshrined in domestic and international human rights legislation, including the 1998 Human Rights Act (articles 10 & 11) and the European Declaration on Human Rights (also articles 10 & 11). For Labour to become the torchbearers of the Tory legacy of restricting such rights, especially if they were to implement the recommendations of the Woodcock report, would represent a clear danger to the future of democracy in Great Britain.

^{43 @}LordWalney, 'Great that @Yvettecooper is acting on this,' 15 July 2024, accessed 18 July 2024, available at: https://x.com/ LordWalney/status/1812958539142303972?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet

⁴⁴ John Mcevoy, Declassified UK, 'Israel Lobby Funded Half of Starmer's Cabinet,' July 9, 2024, accessed July 17, 2024, available at: https://www.declassifieduk.org/israel-lobby-funded-half-of-keir-starmers-cabinet/#:~:text=Exclusive: Labour's top team has,-pounds from pro-Israel funders.&text=Pro-Israel lobbyists have donated,to parliament, Declassified can reveal.



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