

# ***Assemble! Protest Politics and Rights***

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13 May 2026

*Alison Richard Building, University of Cambridge*

Book Launch: *Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Assembly*

Organised by the Centre of Governance and Human Rights

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On 13 May 2026, the Centre of Governance and Human Rights at the University of Cambridge hosted ‘Assemble! Protest Politics and Rights’, a public panel to mark the launch of the *Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Assembly* (Oxford University Press, 2026), edited by Tabatha Abu El-Haj, Michael Hamilton, Thomas Probert, and Sharath Srinivasan. Held in the same room that had hosted an invitation-only scholarly symposium earlier that day, the event was designed not as a conventional book launch but as a convening – one might say, an assembly – intended to generate, in the words of the chair, Professor Sharath Srinivasan, ‘the friction of disagreement and discussion’ and ‘the electricity of people who have actually put their bodies, their consciences and their will on the line.’

Four outstanding panellists were invited to reflect on the theoretical and practical significance of assembling in our age: **Agnès Callamard** is Secretary General of Amnesty International and former UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings, where she led the investigation into the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. **Gina Romero** is a Colombian human rights lawyer and activist, currently serving as UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, who came to the role from years working with social movements and communities across Latin America. **Martha Spurrier** is a barrister and human rights practitioner and former Director of Liberty, who has fought for the rights of protesters both in the courtroom and in the public sphere. **Roger Hallam** is the co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, and most recently Assemble. He was recently released from prison in after serving eighteen months of a five-year sentence (overturned to four on appeal) for blocking the M25 motorway to protest fossil fuel extraction in 2022. The evening moved through three thematic rounds: why assembly and protest matter personally and politically; the threats facing those rights and the forms of resistance to them; and a closing manifesto from each panellist. Questions from the audience followed.

## **Assemble! Protest Politics and Rights**

*Panellists: Agnès Callamard (Secretary General, Amnesty International); Gina Romero (UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association); Martha Spurrier (barrister, human rights campaigner, former Director of Liberty); Roger Hallam (co-founder of Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, and Assemble). Chair: Professor Sharath Srinivasan (Co-Director, Centre of Governance and Human Rights, University of Cambridge).*

### ***Why Assembly and Protest Matter***

Agnès Callamard opened with three images drawn from recent interactions. In Cali, Colombia, police attempted to drown a daughter and raped her mother during a small assembly; when Callamard met them years later, they were still ‘petrified and lived in fear.’ In Nairobi, a 19-year-old Gen Z activist, asked to recount the repression he had witnessed at a public event, broke down entirely. In Minneapolis, she described ordinary people – teachers, nurses, bank tellers – who had organised at block level to protect their neighbours from ICE operations, spending hours watching streets, distributing whistles, with two dying in the process. ‘Picture Mrs Smith,’ she said, ‘the most average person you can imagine, 40 years old, a mother – and picture her on the street whistling.’ For Callamard, these were not born activists but ordinary people who simply said it cannot be happening to my neighbourhood – ‘the demonstration that everyone can become a hero.’

Gina Romero drew on her Colombian upbringing in a conflict in which gathering was ‘not only seen as suspicious, but also dangerous.’ Assembly, for her, is inseparable from the collective memory of that conflict and from the generation of Colombians who, ‘completely fed up,’ began to act together in new ways. More broadly, she argued that assemblies break the isolation produced both by an economic system that does not want people to be together and by a ‘dictatorship of algorithms and technology’ that also wants to isolate individuals from one another. The deepest function of assembly is simply to create human connection: ‘the only thing that can save humanity and ensure humanity in the future is that we keep these connections, that we learn how to live together, how to act together, how to come together.’

Former Liberty director and barrister Martha Spurrier made the case for assembly as a personal, felt reality before turning to law. She described taking her three young children to every protest – including a recent march against the far right – one of the few spaces left ‘in a very online world and a very atomised world’ where genuine community is felt. Marching past a counter-protest, she could walk her three-year-old, five-year-old, and seven-year-old right up to the line and explain what each group believed, ‘why we were turning out on our own behalf and who else we were standing in solidarity with.’

Roger Hallam, who co-founded Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, and Insulate Britain and was recently released from a five-year prison sentence for ‘conspiring to cause a public nuisance’ – partly overturned on appeal after a year and a half in custody – offered a theoretical provocation: he does not believe in human rights as a liberal construction premised on stable individual subjects. What is real in the human space are ‘dynamics:’ norms, herding, recognition, and what he called love. And in that space, ‘the actual central concept is the assembly itself’ – not an add-on to atomised life, but its fundamental structure and a key building block toward a new political system based on popular government.

### ***Threats and Forms of Resistance***

The speakers were asked to explain what constituted, for them, the main threats to assembly, and potential forms of resistance to these threats. Romero focused on the chilling effects of surveillance, drawing on a major joint report published that same day. She described results that struck her as her deepest current concern: not simply the impact on organised activism, but what pervasive surveillance does to the basic human capacity to trust others, form bonds, and assemble at all. ‘Everybody talks about chilling effects,’ she said, ‘but then it is very difficult to grasp what is this,’ and the new research made its pervasive, layered harms far harder to dismiss. Her note of hope lay in young people – in student occupations, in high schoolers organising to protect their own assemblies, and in the creativity and cross-generational solidarity she observed in Serbia and elsewhere.

Spurrer identified a deeper structural threat: a crisis of the law itself. The law's claim to legitimacy now rests on 'the rule of law' alone, without any substantive account of the common good – leaving an extraordinary architecture of legal power available to whoever captures parliamentary majorities. Her warning was direct: 'Reform's explicit intention politically is to establish a disciplined majority in both Houses of Parliament, whereupon they will be able to pass whatever laws they want to pass.' The task was therefore not just legal defence, but forging a coherent political analysis that crosses sectoral boundaries and resolves the internal contradictions of the rights movement itself.

Hallam rejected the framing of 'threat' altogether: 'we're not facing a threat, we're facing a certainty,' with 4 billion deaths caused by climate breakdown and 'the liberal space about to collapse, if you hadn't noticed.' He argued that the relationship between repression and protest is chaotic and non-linear – as often as not, repression creates mobilisation – citing the example of Tbilisi in 1991, where news that Soviet troops would advance in three days caused the crowd in the main square to grow tenfold. Hallam's arguments were grounded in an appeal to a deeper spirituality and ethical virtue whose political manifestation would be citizen assemblies governing.

### ***Closing Manifestos***

To cap off an intense day of intellectual exchange and debate, the four panellists were asked to give the audience their 'manifesto.' Romero's was elemental: 'when the rights of assembly are taken from us, they are taking part of our humanity.' Spurrer's was urgent and practical: 'keep assembling' – it is a muscle that must be flexed now, before the moment arrives when maximum force is required. She also pressed for honesty about the contradictions within the human rights framework, especially the tension between those with a carceral view of rights and those who see the state itself as the problem – arguing that mixed messaging fractures coalition and that activists must at minimum ensure their tactics do not undermine more radical ones.

Hallam's manifesto was rooted in virtue ethics rather than strategy: the first question is not what to do but how to live – to have self-respect and an ethical compass – and only from that foundation does effective instrumentalism become possible. His political analysis was pointed: the biggest structural threat is the desertion of the working class to fascism, driven by the retreat of the progressive middle class into what he called 'performative university-based radicalism.' The corrective – which he had spent the previous six months doing – is to leave the university and talk to working-class people.

Callamard agreed on the substance but pushed back on a strictly class-based analysis of the far right's appeal. The strategic implication of that is to 'reinvest spaces that have been taken over by extreme-right actors' wherever those spaces happen to be (in her French example, rurality rather than simply the working class). Her manifesto was the most institutionally grounded: Amnesty must build a wider tent without losing its radical base, find messages that reach beyond the existing progressive bubble, and maintain, as she put it, '20% of your time just to focus' on imagining what the protection of rights and freedoms should look like by 2048.

Srinivasan closed the evening with the formulation that had run as a thread through the entire day: 'What gets tamed when assembly is tamed is not just a right. It is that power. And its suppression is not incidental, it is the point.'