

British parliament votes to suspend civil liberties

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's 'draconian' Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Bill was overwhelmingly passed by the British parliament in an emergency sitting early Thursday morning. Almost simultaneously the Irish Dail approved similar legislation.

The UK legislation, which was endorsed by 391 votes to 17, overturns basic judicial norms and civil liberties. Under the Bill it is now possible to:

- Convict a person for belonging to a proscribed organisation on the evidence of a senior police officer.
- Treat a suspect's refusal to answer 'relevant' questions, or co-operate with any 'relevant inquiry', as corroboration of the police officers' evidence.
- Enable the seizure of the property and assets of anyone convicted of terrorist acts.

The Bill also introduces a new offence of 'Conspiracy to commit offences outside of the United Kingdom'. This provision enables the British government to take action against any country deemed to be sponsoring or aiding 'terrorism' and to imprison any person in Britain 'conspiring' to carry out such actions abroad.

During the debate Blair again solidarised himself with the US bombing of Afganistan and Sudan, despite the mountain of evidence contradicting President Clinton's justification for the attack. 'Countries which are state sponsors of terrorism must recognise that action will be taken if they sponsor terrorism and if terrorists based in their country take action against their nationals abroad,' he said.

Blair had insisted that Parliament must approve the legislation quickly so that--having passed on to the House of Lords--it could become law by Friday. An attempt by 88 Tory, Labour and Liberal Democrat MP's to extend the time-table for discussion--the full bill was only released Tuesday afternoon--was defeated by a

230-vote majority.

The government had claimed that the emergency measures were necessary to safeguard the 'democratic process' in Ireland, following the bomb-blast in Omagh that killed 28 people. Yet in his statement to Parliament introducing the legislation, Blair said that the Omagh bombers had 'failed' to wreck the Northern Ireland Agreement, 'failed' to divide Catholics and Protestants and 'failed' to win support. This was 'because violence and terror represent the past in Northern Ireland, and democracy and peace represent the future,' he went on.

On Tuesday, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams had denounced terrorism, stating that the war with Britain was a 'thing of the past, over, done with and gone'. As parliament met to approve the emergency legislation, Sinn Fein had begun talks on the decommissioning of weapons held by the IRA. Both announcements were timed to coincide with President Clinton's visit to Northern Ireland on Thursday.

All the main paramilitary organisations in Northern Ireland have declared permanent cease-fires over the last weeks--including the Real IRA (RIRA), which had claimed responsibility for the Omagh bombing. Most of the 30 or so members of the RIRA have been identified by the British and Irish governments who had previously pledged a 'mopping up' operation to deal with them. Capitalising on the revulsion against the Omagh bombing, the media had published photographs and names of those it claimed were responsible.

An unprecedented unity has been established between the British, Irish and US governments, the major political parties north and south of the border and the paramilitary organisations. It was claimed that this would enable the Northern Ireland Agreement to open a new 'democratic chapter' in the history of Ireland.

Yet the Agreement has been accompanied by the

severe curtailment of civil liberties. Repressive legislation once claimed necessary to 'win the war', has been strengthened to 'win the peace'.

Moreover, undemocratic measures, long associated with Britain's occupation of Northern Ireland, have now been extended throughout the UK. The new conspiracy offence will enable the imprisonment of any British citizen agitating in support of, and raising money to fund, dissident movements overseas. On this basis, British supporters of the anti-apartheid movement during the 1980s could have been rounded up.

The parliamentary vote has set a dangerous and far-reaching precedent. Judicial and democratic provisions are no longer considered issues of fundamental principle, but are subject to circumstance. The British government has established that the use of terror is its prerogative alone.

See Also:

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[27 August 1998]

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[25 April 1998]



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