

Britain: Labour places biggest ever government order for closed circuit cameras

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Britain's Labour government has just announced funding plans for the purchase of thousands more closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras. The CCTV cameras will be installed up and down the country at 250 crime "hotspots"—commercial shopping areas, transport and hospital sites.

There are estimated to be a staggering one million CCTV cameras in action today—one for every 60 citizens. Today the average city dweller can expect to be captured on film every five minutes.

The state and private interests already spend £300 million per annum installing new CCTV systems in the UK. The investment of £79 million is the single largest government allocation of money for CCTV systems to date. Home Officer Minister John Denham told the BBC, "CCTV has repeatedly proved its effectiveness in the fight against crime and the fear of crime... Knowing that there is an extra set of eyes watching over their communities helps reassure people that they are safe."

Such justifications for repressive surveillance are in part designed to maintain the fiction that CCTV is deployed to protect the public and that anyone who opposes the extension of state surveillance is unconcerned with public safety. The claims that CCTV reduces crime are somewhat dubious. Jason Ditton at Sheffield University has questioned these assertions. His research suggests that the presence of cameras only serve to displace crime to other locations, frequently from commercial districts into residential areas. Denham's claims that the public feels safer under the gaze of CCTV are also challenged. Ditton found a sizeable number of people who felt uneasy by the spread and intensity of CCTV surveillance and believe it to be a threat to their privacy.

The UK leads the world in the deployment of CCTV, with substantial government funding for police

monitored cameras. Their proliferation, surveying both public and private property and space, has occurred without any form of public discussion or agreement. The technology involved in CCTV is taking on a more sophisticated and even militaristic character. Cameras currently used in the city of Liverpool have bulletproof casing and automated self-defence systems, which automatically focus neighbouring facilities upon a camera under attack. State of the art surveillance cameras employ night vision, computer assisted operation, motion detection facilities and computerised face and movement recognition.

CCTV is promoted by government and the media as a panacea to solve social problems of crime and disorder but their use has grown out of all proportion to the frequency of criminal acts and social disorder. There exist no recognised laws, rules or regulations over the use or deployment of such technology. This lack of debate is hardly surprising. Research carried out by Dr Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong of Hull University asserts that the prime purpose of CCTV technology is to protect private property and business interests. Members of the public deemed to be "out of place"—the poor, the homeless, street traders and people from ethnic minorities are all targeted by CCTV. The technology also rides roughshod over the right to assembly and to express political dissent in the public realm, free from state interference. The biggest single user of CCTV is the police, who employ CCTV to monitor the activity and movements of those who represent a political threat to the interests of private property.



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