

Britain: Parliament overwhelmingly approves anti-terrorism bill

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23 November 2001

Monday's near unanimous parliamentary vote for the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill marks a political watershed in Britain. It confirms the absence of any commitment to the defence of democratic rights throughout much of the Labour Party and the ruling establishment.

MPs voted by 458 votes to five to allow the bill to pass on to a second reading and then the House of Lords, after which the government hopes it will become law before Christmas. The five voting against included four Labour MPs—Jeremy Corbyn, George Galloway, Paul Marsden and Brian Sedgemore—and former Conservative minister John Gummer. The debate was limited to just six hours, with a number of other MPs and the Liberal Democrats initially abstaining in protest at the short time allotted.

At its second reading on Wednesday, the number of dissenters increased, with 32 Labour MPs voting against, including three former ministers, Mark Fisher, Peter Kilfoyle and Tony Lloyd. Nonetheless the bill was passed by 325 votes to 89, a government majority of 236, whilst a “sunset clause”, which means the bill must be renewed every five years by parliament, was presented as a triumph for civil liberties.

The bill enables Britain to intern foreign nationals suspected of terrorism without the need for a trial, and gives the state wide-ranging powers to access phone and Internet data. (See: Britain: government unveils draconian “anti-terror” bill) As internment is a breach of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits imprisonment without trial, Home Secretary David Blunkett declared a national state of emergency last week, to enable the government to derogate the Convention's Article 5.

The measures contained in the bill go far beyond the government's professed aim of combating terrorism. The declaration of a state of emergency and the bill's 128 clauses impact significantly on the democratic rights of every person in Britain. Yet Blunkett has responded with impatience to anyone voicing concern. Earlier he had dismissed his critics as “airy fairy”. During the debate, even Blunkett's own contempt for civil liberties was exceeded by

Labour MP Kevin Hughes, who derided the bill's opponents as the “yoghurt-eating, muesli-eating, *Guardian*-reading, sandal-wearing fraternity.”

Explaining his concerns regarding the proposed bill, Labour MP Brian Sedgemore described its measures as a result of “panic and hysteria” following the September 11 terrorist outrages, which he compared to the reaction within the British establishment “in the aftermath of the French Revolution”.

Sedgemore is wrong in simply attributing the measures to panic and hysteria; the government has used September 11 as a pretext for implementing a series of measures that have previously been blocked. However, he says more than he perhaps intends when he compares the present legislation to that enacted by the British ruling class following the revolutionary events of 1789. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* galvanised the ruling class, who were determined that nothing but the most ruthless opposition to social and political change was possible if they were to survive. In October 1790, the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended. Radical leaders were arrested on charges of high treason after they held a national convention. Some were transported to the colonies under the most brutal conditions. The Treason and Sedition Acts of 1795 and 1799 meant that the Corresponding Societies, clubs of working men that maintained contact with the Jacobins in France, were suppressed. In 1799 the Combination Acts banned all clubs and societies formed by working men for the purpose of improving their pay and conditions.

Although there are few signs of independent political activity on the part of the working class at present, the scale and scope of the measures being proposed by the Labour government can only be understood as a political reaction on behalf of the ruling elite to the depth of social antagonisms within Britain and internationally.

Labour came to power in 1997 after almost two decades in which working people's living standards had suffered constant attack, resulting in the widest-ever gap between rich and poor. Labour's task was to find some political means of

stabilising class relations whilst it continued the pro-big business policies of their hated Conservative predecessors.

Traditionally, Labour had fulfilled this responsibility by advancing a programme of limited social reforms designed to ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalism. This time, however, Britain's rulers refused to countenance any retreat from their class war agenda. The Blair government took office after the Labour Party had abandoned its old reformist programme and was proclaiming itself to be a "people's party", rather than one prioritising the interests of the working class.

A key element of what became known as Prime Minister Blair's "Third Way," was his claim to have returned to a classic liberal democratic agenda; describing the formation of the Labour Party in 1906 through a split with the Liberals as a "mistake".

Long before September 11, however, the Blair government had already proved itself to be the most illiberal and authoritarian in modern history. Having proclaimed its central political and economic aim to be the defence of private profit through the erosion of wages and social welfare provisions, New Labour has implemented legislation curtailing freedom of speech, virtually abolishing data privacy, restricting jury trials, and a plethora of other measures. Under conditions where class antagonisms have reached such an extraordinary degree of maturity, the ruling elite can no longer tolerate genuine democratic expression for those it seeks to exploit.

Labour's repudiation of democratic principles was most fully articulated in a speech by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to the Institute of Strategic Studies on October 22. Straw identified the danger of terrorism emerging from what he termed "failed states". In describing what constituted the essence of a healthy, viable state, however, Straw took as his starting point political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli's (1469-1527) assertion, "The chief foundations of all states... are good laws and good armies," and sociologist Max Weber's (1864-1920) insistence on a state's "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory". Straw concluded from this, "whatever the historical reasons, where the basis of the state, its laws or its armies, are fatally weakened, chaos is the result."

Though Straw's policy speech was couched in terms of being Britain's response to the threat of international terrorism, its implications for Britain have now been made abundantly clear by the new Anti-Terrorism Bill.

One need only recall that the Public Order Act was passed in the 1930s, ostensibly to deal with Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. It has been used ever since to curtail the political rights of the working class. The present bill can easily be extended so that its provisions also cover

British citizens. Part 13, Clause 109, enables European Union legislation concerning the pooling of judicial and police powers throughout the EU to be implemented without parliamentary approval. The measures currently under discussion in Brussels are by no means limited to terrorist crimes. The creation of a European arrest warrant, for example, could enable Britons to be arrested and sent abroad for trial without ever appearing before a British court.

To those who base their political calculations on superficial appearances, it would seem barely credible to assert that the government is motivated primarily by the need to suppress domestic opposition to its policies. After all, strikes and other forms of protest are at an all-time low; the parliamentary opposition is marginal; the Labour left has all but disappeared and the trade union leaders are so fully integrated into the structures of corporate management that they have effectively ceased to exist as an independent factor.

The government claims that the new legislation is required to deal with just 15-20 people. When Blunkett declared the state of emergency, he described it as a "technicality" that was solely aimed at enabling the government to imprison a handful of suspected foreign terrorists. He has insisted that the public take on good faith that the government will not abuse the wide-ranging powers it is accruing.

Only a fool would believe such assurances. The present legislation is being pushed through parliament under conditions of a highly volatile political situation, both at home and abroad. The bombing of Afghanistan is only a prelude to a more extended campaign to determine who will control the oil-rich Central Asian and Middle East regions. It marks the resurgence of colonial wars of conquest that must generate widespread opposition. Most importantly, the world economy is already teetering on the brink of recession, threatening the livelihoods of millions of people.

Faced with a return to mass unemployment, and the gutting of public finances to pay for further military adventures, the Labour government has made it clear that it will respond by strengthening the state's repressive apparatus in order to deal with the social and political consequences of its policies. As Straw so crudely indicated, what is needed today is not government by consent, or any other democratic ideal, but the possession of strong armies and the preservation of the state's monopoly of physical force.



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