

Britain's "anti-terror" measures--a fundamental attack on democratic rights

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

14 November 2001

Britain's Labour government is seeking to rush through the most sweeping attack on democratic rights since the Second World War, on the flimsy pretext of combating terrorism.

In an unprecedented move on Monday, Home Secretary David Blunkett formally declared a national state of emergency. His rationale for doing so was to enable the government to introduce the internment of foreign nationals deemed to be a terrorist threat.

This cannot be done without suspending Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits detention without trial. Under Article 15 of the Convention, however, signatory states "may take measures derogating from its obligations under this Convention", during times of "war or other public emergency threatening the life of the nation".

The state of emergency is a prelude to the introduction of a raft of measures presented to parliament on Tuesday in an 80-clause Bill. According to initial reports, as well as introducing the internment of foreign nationals, the Bill also includes measures to:

- * Extend the law on inciting racial hatred to include inciting "religious hatred", with the penalty raised from two to seven years.
- * Give police the power to freeze the funds of anyone under investigation, monitor bank accounts and seize assets.
- * Tighten laws on inciting terrorist acts overseas.
- * Oblige Internet Service Providers and mobile phone companies to keep records of emails and phone calls.
- * Oblige airlines and ferry services to keep and provide records of passengers and freight.

Ministers have also suggested that the passports of British Muslims may be withdrawn if they are suspected of travelling to Afghanistan to fight with the Taliban. The Bill is to be rushed through the Commons this week, with all its parliamentary stages completed by the Christmas recess.

The sweeping character of these proposals stands in stark contrast to the scale of the supposed threat it is meant to combat. The government has dismissed concerns over the

Bill's impact on civil liberties, claiming that it will affect around just 20 individuals, and that no one else has any reason to be alarmed. Yet Blunkett has passed the legislation on the basis that the "life of the nation" is in danger.

Even before the passage of the new Bill, Britain's anti-terrorism legislation was already amongst the most stringent in the world. The most recent legislation, passed just two years ago, provides for the illegalisation of any organisation or group of individuals who advocate the overthrow of any government in the world. However, it only allows for suspects to be held without charge for a maximum of seven days. The new Bill will allow the indefinite detention of any foreign nationals falling in this category.

The threat of terrorism is being utilised to implement measures that curtail the democratic rights of every person in Britain. The claim that the new Bill will only target 20 foreign nationals is contradicted by the threat to withdraw the passports of British subjects.

More serious still is the imposition of a state of emergency, which a government spokesman attempted to dismiss as a "formal procedure".

It is impossible to be specific about the scope of the powers that calling a state of emergency gives the government, but they will be far reaching. It is certainly the case that the right to strike, and even demonstrate, can be curtailed. To cite another example, even habeas corpus can be suspended, meaning that any individual, not only foreign nationals could be detained without trial.

Britain does not possess a written constitution. Britons are not citizens, endowed with inalienable rights defined in law, but subjects who are granted certain privileges by the Crown as the head of state. As such, basic freedoms exist only negatively: one may do that which is not expressly legally prohibited. Once a state of emergency is declared, the government can bypass many legal restraints.

It was only in February that Britain became the last European Union (EU) member to adopt the European Convention on Human Rights, which it was claimed would redress the absence of written constitutional provisions. Yet

just months later, Britain has become the first EU state to opt out of the Convention.

Neither the state of emergency nor the new Bill should be seen as short-term measures, that will be rescinded following the Taliban's defeat or the capture of bin Laden. Both will remain in force for at least a year before they are subject to renewal. Given that government representatives have described the so-called "war on terrorism" as possibly lasting for decades—and the open discussion within ruling circles about extending the war to Iraq and other supposed sponsors of terrorism—it would be foolish to assume that the measures will be withdrawn even then.

When Britain first introduced the Prevention of Terrorism Act (Temporary Measures) in 1971, and with its internment in Northern Ireland, it was renewed every year as a matter of course. Under the PTA, hundreds of innocent people were rounded up, detained and in some cases tortured. In the intervening period, Britain secured a reputation for having the worst human rights record of any Western European nation. Most of the PTA's provisions were incorporated into permanent legislation since Labour came to office in 1997 and do not need to be renewed annually and apply far more broadly than the Irish conflict.

As it has done repeatedly, the Blair government has taken pole position in attacking civil liberties. But such an attack is being waged in every single country. From Germany to South Africa, governments have echoed Prime Minister Blair's claim that the war against terrorism announced by the Bush administration in the aftermath of September 11 necessitates the suspension of basic democratic rights. The actual terrorist threat to many countries is never even specified; therefore one must assume something more fundamental is at stake.

The British ruling class supports the war against terrorism because it recognises the bombing of Afghanistan as the prelude to a re-division of the oil-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East between the imperialist powers. It wants to stake its own claim to a share of the spoils.

This is made all the more urgent by the profound economic difficulties being experienced by British capitalism, under conditions of a deepening world recession. With many major corporations facing bankruptcy, securing vast new sources of profit such as oil and gas supplies becomes a life and death question.

History has demonstrated time and again that democratic rights are among the first casualties of war. Social relations in Britain are already tense. For the past four years, the Blair government has been waging a systematic campaign to destroy the welfare state, slash public spending and lower wages. Over the same period, millions of pounds have been spent on successive military ventures aimed at asserting

British imperialism's interests overseas.

The scope of Labour's attack on democratic rights is dictated by the government's fear that opposition to the destruction of living standards will merge with the growing anti-war sentiment. To this end, Labour has rubbed the concerns of civil rights groups by insisting that national security take precedence over democratic rights. The prime minister's spokesman said, "People will object to it, but we are absolutely determined to get the balance right between human rights, which are important, and society's right to live free from terror." Home Secretary Blunkett added, "We could live in a world which is airy fairy, libertarian, where everybody does precisely what they like and we believe the best of everybody and then they destroy us".

Labour's latest measures have underscored the absence of any commitment to democratic rights inside Britain's ruling elite. The proposals created barely a ripple in parliament, while even those newspapers critical of the measures, such as the *Guardian*, limited themselves to a respectful appeal for government caution. As has become customary, the trade unions are maintaining a deafening silence.

The full political implications of the absence of any significant democratic sentiment within the British establishment must be understood by all those concerned with preserving civil liberties. The responsibility for the defence of democratic rights rests entirely with the working class, which must begin to act independently of its old parties and organisations. Working people must reject all appeals to sacrifice their hard-won liberties. They have no interest in the strivings of Britain's rulers to further enrich themselves at the expense of the world's workers and oppressed masses. Genuine democracy, peace and prosperity can only be realised through a unified struggle of the international working class for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact