

# Britain: Blair outlines punitive law-and-order campaign

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The Blair government has announced a new round of punitive measures against teenagers and others, directed in particular at the poorest neighbourhoods.

Prime Minister Tony Blair and Home Secretary David Blunkett spelled out plans for a government campaign against “anti-social behaviour” at a press conference on October 14. The government’s list of such behaviours is a catchall covering everything from graffiti to teenagers standing on street corners.

Pilot schemes in several cities will see 10 “trailblazer” initiatives focusing on “nuisance” neighbours, beggars and abandoned cars. Targeting those living in public housing, the scheme could see people kicked out of their homes or their tenancy contracts reduced for failure to comply.

Specially created Nuisance Neighbour Panels are to be charged with policing specific “problem” families—150 households in Birmingham and Manchester, 100 in Sheffield and 50 in Sunderland. These will be told to modify their behaviour or face penalties including parenting orders, anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) that restrict freedom of movement, and eviction.

Young people will be subject to police-enforced curfews, merely for gathering in groups of more than two. Police in a “trailblazer” area will have new powers to disperse groups of two or more unsupervised teenagers and to impose a 9:00 p.m. curfew in certain areas on anyone under the age of 16 not accompanied by an adult.

Begging is also to become a recordable offence for the first time in the pilot areas of Brighton, Bristol and Leeds, and Westminster and Camden in London—with the police empowered to arrest and fingerprint culprits.

A national project, described as a “shop ’em and stop ’em” scheme, is to be set up for people to inform on

graffiti artists.

Blunkett said that the pilot scheme was aimed at creating a “step change” in attitudes to inner-city policing. In January, the government’s “Anti-Social Behaviour Bill” is set to become law. This sets out guidelines to the courts and local authorities on the measures that must be taken against those accused of “nuisance” behaviour, such as court-imposed ASBOs that bar individuals from certain areas, or the withdrawal of social rights such as housing.

Some of the measures contained within the Bill are already in existence, but the government has been angered by the failure of social services, the courts and local authorities to take up the measures with sufficient vigour. Only a relatively small number of ASBOs have so far been imposed, mainly against teenagers, some as young as 13, whilst evictions for nuisance behaviour remain rare.

Children’s campaigners had denounced the new measures as punitive. Patricia Durr for the Children’s Society said giving the police power to move on teenagers simply because their “presence” gives rise to “alarm or distress” was a step too far, especially as what causes “alarm or distress” was not defined. “The legislation suggests the very presence of young people is a problem and it pits them against their own communities,” she said.

Lawyer Anthony Jennings QC said the legislation will breach democratic rights. The measures directed against teenagers in particular “is unduly harsh and punishes someone for merely being present. The order can last up to six months and amounts to a blanket curfew.

“This is the imposition of government morality in relation to 15-year-olds who have done nothing more wrong than be on the street on a warm summer’s night

in the school holidays.”

Blunkett responded by denouncing any concern over the government’s policies as the outcome of “garbage from the ’60s and ’70s,” deliberately employing the traditional bete noir of the right wing, who associate those decades with progressive social and legal reforms. He threatened that those who failed to comply with government policy would find their jobs on the line. “They are paid by the community and they should be held to account by the community. If they don’t do their job on behalf of the community, the chief officers of police, housing, environmental health or the courts should simply get rid of them.”

To ensure the measures go through, Blunkett warned that greater powers would be made available to police to enforce the pilot scheme, and said that special prosecutors will be appointed to “fast-track” action against the worst anti-social offenders.

The scheme, which was hailed in the media as a “war on yobs,” was backed by government statistics claiming that loutish behaviour was “striking every two seconds” somewhere in the country. According to government figures, in one day 66,107 reports of anti-social behaviour were recorded nationally. Of these, however, nearly 11,000 concerned littering. Less than 8,000 related to criminal activity such as drugs, prostitution and hoax calls to the emergency services.

More fundamentally, such statistics do not address the issue of the conditions that give rise to social dysfunction.

All of the pilot areas chosen for the new initiative are amongst the most deprived in the country. This is not the result of individual choice or any other such reactionary nonsense peddled by the government. Rather, it is the outcome of a deliberate political policy whereby for more than two decades successive governments have carried out a major redistribution of wealth away from working people to the rich.

This process has deepened under the Blair government. Social inequality is now higher than at anytime under the Conservatives, with more than one third of all children officially classified as poor. At the same time, attacks on public spending have led to the downgrading or closure of social amenities, particularly for young people.

By denying millions the right to a decent standard of living, education and health care, it is the government

itself that is guilty of anti-social behaviour on a grand scale.

New Labour hopes to detract from this reality. Its latest law-and-order initiative is the classic response of a government that is bereft of political legitimacy and resorts to playing the populist card. The government hopes that its “anti-yob” campaign will play well not only in the general population, but especially amongst its target audience in the media.

Sure enough, Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* tabloid, amongst others, has eagerly embraced the new scheme. Having piloted the “naming and shaming” of those accused of child sex abuse, the *Sun* has now extended its campaign to “anti-social” offenders.

Its “Shop a Yob” project involves running mug-shots and printing posters of those accused of anti-social behaviour, including children as young as 13 years of age. Its editorial railed, “For years, teachers haven’t been able to cane unruly pupils” and complained that the police had been stopped from delivering “the old-fashioned short, sharp shock of a clip round the ear.” The only solution was “building more jails,” it said.

Such pronouncements make clear that the underlying aim of the government’s policy is to create a climate where the undermining of democratic rights is the norm. By transforming what was previously regarded as relatively minor nuisance behaviour into criminal offences, New Labour is seeking to justify ever more authoritarian forms of policing and social control, whilst criminalising young people in the most disadvantaged communities.



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