

Britain: Blunkett to legislate for “thought crimes” and guilt by association

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Twenty years after 1984, the date for George Orwell’s dystopian vision, the British home secretary hopes to introduce a new category of imprisonable offence—“thought crime,” or guilt by association.

According to two recent newspaper articles, David Blunkett is considering jailing those who merely “sympathise” with so-called extremist Islamic groups or who continue to “associate” with alleged terrorist suspects.

The *Observer* wrote on April 11, “Sympathisers with extremist Islamic groups will risk jail under controversial plans to make merely associating with a suspected terrorist a crime.”

The next day, the *Times* reported, “Those whose names were found on seized mobile phones, computers or e-mails and who tried further contact would find themselves facing prison.”

The paper added that the home secretary would like a formal warning given to “every known contact of a terror suspect or extremist Islamic group.” A source close to the home secretary was quoted saying, “We are targeting support networks, the things that enable terrorism to be perpetrated by other people. It is intended to deter people from hanging around the fringes of undesirables.”

The latest musings of Blunkett are a double attack on democratic rights.

Firstly, the proposal to introduce “guilt by association” makes criminals of those who have committed no crime. Secondly, by extension the so-called “undesirables” with whom they associate face a form of banning order reminiscent of the apartheid regime in South Africa, preventing them from coming into contact with anyone.

Barry Hugill, spokesman for civil rights group Liberty, said, “You cannot start imprisoning people for

what may or may not be going on inside their head.”

The Labour government has introduced some of the most draconian “anti-terrorist” legislation in Europe. Britain has declared a “technical” state of emergency, enabling the suspension of sections of the European Convention on Human Rights. This then makes possible the indefinite internment of foreign nationals as “terrorist suspects,” without recourse to the normal juridical process.

The 14 individuals who have been locked up under the terms of the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 (ATCSA) enter a Kafkaesque world where they may not see the evidence that supposedly justifies their incarceration, nor may they appoint an independent legal representative to challenge their imprisonment in the courts. They can only be set free if they agree to be deported back to the country from which they have fled, where their life may well be in danger. The choice is stark: indefinite detention without due legal process, or possible death.

In February, Blunkett proposed the introduction of a form of “pre-emptive” justice, where suspects could be jailed based on charges for crimes they had not yet committed.

It is a measure of the disregard for longstanding democratic norms that permeates official politics and most of the media in Britain that the home secretary’s latest proposal passed largely without comment or criticism.



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