

# Britain: Labour unveils its latest assault on democratic rights

Richard Tyler  
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When he came to power in 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair said he would be “tough on crime, and tough on the causes of crime.” While he has certainly lived up to his word on the first half of his syllogism, New Labour policy has fostered the growth of the second.

Appropriating the right-wing law-and-order mantle of their Conservative predecessors, New Labour has gone further than any British government in eroding fundamental rights, while strengthening the powers of the central state to order and control its citizens.

The recently announced “five-year strategy for the Criminal Justice System and the Home Office” constitutes a further assault on long-standing democratic rights and legal norms.

Blair singled out those guilty of so-called “anti-social behaviour,” who would in future face even more repressive measures.

\* Summary justice, in the form of on-the-spot fines of up to £80, could be meted out for offences such as petty shoplifting, throwing fireworks, underage drinking or vandalism.

\* Special fast-track court proceedings could face so-called “prolific offenders.” Those categorised in this way and who have served their punishment could then be electronically tagged upon their release, so their movements can be monitored.

\* Such tagging is set to be massively extended, with up to 18,000 individuals being monitored at any time. Those convicted of sex offences could face satellite tracking and polygraph (lie detector) tests once they are released.

\* In a measure more reminiscent of the village stocks or branding of criminals, the “fifty worst offenders” in an area could be publicly “named and shamed.”

\* All British citizens will have to carry ID cards, and all those entering and leaving the country will be photographed.

\* The right to a jury trial will be rescinded where there is a suggestion of jurors being intimidated.

\* “Organised criminals” could face the “pre-emptive seizure of their assets.”

\* Anti-Social Behaviour Orders will be extended, through so-called “interim ASBOs.” Under these regulations, an ASBO can be taken out against an individual without a case being proved “beyond reasonable doubt,” the standard of proof required in criminal proceedings. However, those then found in breach of an ASBO can face automatic criminal penalties.

The measures went so far even the conservative *Economist* was prompted to write, “Such remedies are draconian, particularly given that vandalism—the most measurable kind of anti-social behaviour—has been declining since 1995. Even coppers are surprised. ‘I never thought I would live in a country where the police would have these powers,’ says Stuart Chapman, a chief superintendent from the South Yorkshire force.”

The pro-Labour *Guardian* described the proposals as “a step change in the state’s capacity to know where we are.”

Justifying this further round of repression, Blair said the new strategy “marks the end of the 1960s liberal, social consensus on law and order.” Although that decade saw “a huge breakthrough in terms of freedom of expression” and the “beginning of a consensus against discrimination” on grounds of sex or race, the decade “spawned a group of young people who were brought up without parental discipline, without proper role models and without any sense of responsibility for others,” Blair opined.

In words that would not seem out of place on the lips of Margaret Thatcher (or former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet), Blair said people want “rules, order and proper behaviour.”

“They want a society of respect. They want a society of responsibility.” Of course, in Blair’s eyes, the supreme object of this “respect” is the state itself and those who administer it.

His frothing diatribe is as illogical as it is reactionary.

The specious nature of Blair’s rant against the 1960s did not elude the house organ of the British ruling class, the *Times*. “Hence the peculiar suggestion that only now has a ‘1960s liberal consensus’ on law and order been abandoned,

as if 18 years of Conservative rule, and in particular Michael Howard's work as home secretary under John Major, had not departed already from that tradition," the "Thunderer" editorialised.

Moreover, the young people brought up "without parental discipline" could not be those who were themselves young in the 1960s, since their parents were born in the 1920s and '30s, hardly decades renowned for their liberal attitudes.

If Blair then means these socially recalcitrant young people are the children of the "1960s generation," then their formative years were the 1980s and '90s, the years of the Thatcher and Major Tory governments.

Holding up "the 1960s" as the cause of social dysfunction, rising crime and "anti-social behaviour" is the hallmark of reactionaries of every stripe. It is that decade's links with certain progressive ideals that is rejected by law-and-order fanatics such as Blair (who admitted in his speech that the issue has been "something of a personal crusade").

The legalisation of abortion, the lifting of censorship on books and stage productions, the legalisation of homosexuality, the abolition of corporal and capital punishment were just some of the juridical measures introduced in the 1960s.

Since entering office, New Labour has implemented an agenda of social control and repression that has earned it the soubriquet "rightwash." Between 1997 and 2001, Blair's government has implemented 31 law-and-order bills. Between 1997 and 2003, it has created 661 new criminal offences. Between 2001 and 2004, it has overseen 154 "anti-crime initiatives." Between 1993 and 2004, the prison population has mushroomed from 41,000 to 75,000.

In his speech, Blair made a passing reference to the "complex and tragic antecedents" that often underlie criminal behaviour. However, the Labour government has completely rejected the findings of decades of sociological research into social and economic factors such as deprivation, inequality, social class, family circumstances and employment.

Instead, it has adopted and extended the policies of the Thatcher and Major Tory governments, eroding what remains of the universal welfare system and presiding over a further growth in social inequality.

This week, the Institute for Public Policy Research (a pro-Labour think-tank) announced a new study showing that the richest 1 percent of Britons have doubled their share of wealth from around 6 percent in 1980 to 13 percent in 1999. The top 10 percent have also done very well under Labour, increasing their share of wealth from 47 to 54 percent in the last ten years (seven of which are during Blair's premiership). While the poorest families have seen a very modest rise in their incomes, this has largely been at the

expense of working-age adults without children, who constituted 31 percent of those in poverty in 2003, up from 25 percent in 1994.

In a paper to the British Criminology Conferences, Professor David Downes notes, "When greater affluence is combined with growing inequality and the rise of what has been called a winner/loser culture, crime has climbed even more steeply. In England and Wales, official crime rates doubled over the 1979-92 period, most dramatically by 40 percent between 1989 and 1992."

Analysing the "complex issues and evidence" linking socioeconomic factors and crime, Downes points out that a simple paradigm charting crime against employment levels is insufficient, since "insecure and under-employment is not better than employment... Short spells of unemployment between rewarding jobs is better than being stuck with work that offers only poor pay, hours, conditions and prospects." But it is precisely the proliferation of minimum wage "McJobs" fostered by New Labour that are on offer to many school (and even university) leavers today.

Tony Blair and New Labour are presiding over a social experiment with devastating consequences. Having abandoned their previous social reformist programme, they are advancing Thatcherite privatisation across what remains of public health, education and housing. Welfare is no longer a safety net, but a sanction to force the unwilling into accepting low-paid work.

Those who do not behave in ways deemed socially acceptable will face the full force of the law. For all Blair's prattle about "anti-social behaviour," those most guilty of this crime sit alongside him in his cabinet.

*Crime and Inequality: Current Issues in Research and Public Debate*, Professor David Downes



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