Britain: Blair government outlines fresh attack on civil liberties

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The Blair government has outlined new proposals to further restrict civil liberties and strengthen the state apparatus under the guise of a crackdown on animal rights extremists.

The misanthropic outlook at the heart of animal rights extremism, with its denunciations of humans as no better, and in many instances much worse, than animals, has seen it involved in a series of provocative incidents that the government is now utilising for its own reactionary ends.

Research involving animals is closely regulated in Britain, with the Home Office reporting that 2.73 million animal experiments were conducted in the UK in 2002, of which 84 percent were on rodents. Of such procedures—most of which were for research and drug development purposes—non-toxic testing accounted for 82 percent of all experiments. Animal testing for cosmetics is banned, and despite often highly emotive campaigns by animal rights activists, dogs, cats, horses and primates account for less than 1 percent of animal experiments.

Nonetheless, according to the *Observer* newspaper, the number of attacks admitted by animal rights activists has increased 40-fold over the last two years. Since the start of 2004, they have carried out more than 150 high-profile incidents in the UK, up from 4 in 2002.

Scientists involved in animal experimentation have been particular targets for intimidation, including protests outside their homes, threatening letters and attacks on property. The views of US activist Jerry Vlasak, whom the government has threatened to bar from entering Britain, have been widely trailed in the media. The *Observer* quoted him stating that "If something bad happens to these people [animal researchers], it will discourage others. It is inevitable that violence will be used in the struggle and that it will be effective."

He has also been quoted as stating that "I don't think you'd have to kill too many [researchers]. I think for five lives, 10 lives, 15 human lives, we could save a million, 2 million, 10 million non-human lives."

Vlasak is amongst a number of US activists invited to address animal rights organisations in Britain, such as Shac, the group that campaigned against Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), which uses animals for research, in Cambridge; and Speak, which spearheaded efforts to stop construction of an animal research laboratory at Oxford University.

Shac's campaign against HLS led to banks, auditors and insurers withdrawing services from the research centre. And in January, Cambridge University was forced to abandon plans to develop a primate laboratory aimed at research into cures for such neurodegenerative disorders as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

South Cambridgeshire district council had rejected planning permission for the project on the grounds that it would become a target for protests and threats by animal rights activists. A subsequent public inquiry had recommended that the project should not go ahead on the grounds that it was not of national importance.

In November, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott had overruled the recommendations, giving the green light to the project, only for the university itself to announce that it had abandoned the scheme due to financial pressures. Britain's universities account for the largest portion of animal experimentation, at 40 percent, with most containing test laboratories.

More recently, work on the development of an animal testing laboratory at Oxford University, aimed at replacing existing animal house facilities at a number of campuses, was abandoned when the construction group Montpellier said it was withdrawing from the project after its shareholders received threatening letters.

Earlier, animal rights activists had set fire to three lorries in Surrey, an attack that the Animal Liberal Front said was a warning that "collaboration in animal torture at Oxford or anywhere else will not be tolerated, and a further warning to all involved in building the Oxford laboratory to expect similar ruthless treatment."

According to the *Guardian*, one director of a construction company received a note from "from Animal Rights Activists" threatening that if his company did not cease

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involvement in the Oxford laboratory, "within one week a letter about you will mailed to hundreds of your neighbours. It will contain a forged criminal record showing a string of sexual offences committed by yourself throughout your adult life."

Such incidents have led to warnings that companies and investors involved in the lucrative pharmaceutical industry will pull out of Britain unless the government takes a firm line.

The bioscience industry in Britain is the second largest in the world, employing some 75,000 people directly and 250,000 indirectly. The UK is also the world's largest exporter of pharmaceuticals, worth nearly £12 billion in 2003. But companies such as GlaxoSmithKline, the country's leading drug maker, have complained that animal rights extremists are endangering such investment.

GlaxoSmithKline's chief executive, Jean-Paul Garnier, has publicly urged that the government "do more with its police and judiciary" to deal with animal rights activists, a call backed by Pfizer Europe, which spends £10 million a week on research and development in the UK.

In response, the government released a hastily drawn-up 20-page document, "Animal Welfare—Human Rights: protecting people from animal rights extremists," at the end of July.

The paper acknowledges that existing legislation is more than sufficient to deal with any threat apparently posed by animal rights activities. In addition to legislation covering murder and manslaughter, an annex to the paper lists 12 existing acts outlawing harassment, intimidation and violence—ranging from the Public Order Act 1986 to the Terrorism Act 2000.

But the government has seized on the protests over animal research to bring forward legislative proposals that go far beyond the activities of a handful of animal rights extremists.

Under its proposals the right to protest is severely restricted, and treated as virtually akin to terrorism. The paper notes for example, that under the Terrorism Act passed in 2001, the definition of terrorism was extended to include those "who engage in serious violence, endanger life or create a serious risk to the health and safety of the public for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause."

It warns ominously that "Animal rights extremists engaged in these activities should not, therefore, be surprised to find themselves treated as terrorists."

Moreover, the paper refers generally to the "activities of extremists" as cause for concern. It notes that in March, a National Extremism Tactical Co-ordinating Unit (NETCU) was formed "to provide tactical advice and guidance to police forces dealing with extremism." A new national policing framework is currently being developed "for tackling extremism," it states.

So amorphous is the label "extremism" as used in the paper that it covers non-specific protests involving two or more people that could be subject to criminal charges if they were deemed by police to be "intimidatory."

The government intends to bring forward legislation that will make it an offence to protest outside homes "where the effect is to intimidate or cause distress." By extending the laws on stalking, the government proposes that a person can be arrested and prosecuted under the 1997 Harassment Act even if they have only appeared once outside a premises, or where the police have "reasonable grounds" for suspecting a person is guilty of such an offence.

The Anti-Social Behaviour Act (ASBO), supposedly introduced to deal with minor nuisance offences, is also to be extended to cover "extremist" activity. The burden of proof is far lower in the case of courts imposing ASBO orders, which impose curfews and no-go areas on the individual concerned, although individuals can face imprisonment if they are found to have contravened the order.

The paper further proposes to consider measures preventing Internet service providers from posting legal material on sites, including "material deemed to cause concern or needless anxiety to others."

The government states that it is also examining the possibility of "making it an offence to cause economic damage" to firms and suppliers. Although the paper raises this in terms of those companies involved in the "licensed use of animals," such a measure could clearly be expanded to impose restrictions on strikes and protests involving boycotts.

Civil liberty organisations have condemned the proposals for their implications on democratic rights in general, but the media has wholeheartedly embraced the plans, with the *Daily Mail* demanding that "The whole country should support David Blunkett's plans to get tough."

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