

Britain: pro-hunt protest utilised to force through attacks on democratic rights

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Last week's invasion of parliament by eight pro-hunting protesters attracted howls of derision from the media over "antiquated" security arrangements at Britain's seat of government.

TV broadcasts from inside parliament beamed live coverage of the eight, who counted a polo playing friend of Princes William and Harry, and a millionaire rock star's son amongst their number. Five of their number succeeded in bursting into the debating chamber and haranguing bemused MPs, before being chased and wrestled to the ground by what have subsequently been ridiculed as "men in tights"—parliament's Sergeant at Arms and his ceremonial ushers in traditional dress.

The incident occurred soon after parliament had voted by 339 to 155 to ban hunting foxes with dogs—the traditional pursuit of Britain's upper classes. According to reports, the protesters had inside help in gaining entrance through security doors into the Ladies' Gate stairway that leads directly into the Commons chamber.

The following day the *Sun* newspaper revealed that its reporter, Anthony France, working under cover as a waiter had managed to smuggle a fake bomb into parliament without being challenged. Under the headline, "Sun 'bomber' in Commons", France told how he had "STOOD within 2ft of [Deputy Prime Minister] John Prescott at the House of Commons and could have blown him up on the spot".

France continued, "Had I been a terrorist, I could have left the 'device' in a toilet or in the restaurant where I worked.

"It could easily have blown up the Chamber just 20 yards away—killing hundreds of MPs."

France's "bomb", consisting of batteries, wire, a timer and modelling clay, was incapable of blowing anything up. But it certainly made an impact.

One might assume that the response of the government to such a stunt would be to denounce the *Sun* for trivialising such an important issue as security from terrorism—and even possibly embarrassing the government itself in the process. Not so. Instead government ministers heaped grovelling

praise on Rupert Murdoch's flagship publication, with Peter Hain, Labour leader of the Commons, publicly thanking the tabloid for its fake bomb scare.

The *Sun*, he said, "has done the House [of Commons] a favour by exposing the amateurship and old fashioned culture which is a threat to the very cockpit of our democracy."

What Hain really meant was that Murdoch's tabloid had done the Labour government a favour. For the *Sun*'s journalistic scoop dovetailed rather neatly with the immediate aims of government.

Currently armed police guard parliament's perimeters and its main gates, and all members of the public must pass through metal detectors and have their bags screened. However, internal security is provided by the frock-coated and rapier carrying Sergeant at Arms and his 30 or so helpers. Their get-up is certainly bizarre, though no more so than all the other paraphernalia that attends parliamentary business—Black Rod, the Queen's speech, etc. But the origins of this security arrangement lies in parliament's efforts to guard its independence from the Crown, by ensuring that internal policing is directed by the House itself, rather than by an agency of the state. Currently police are not allowed access to the chamber without permission from the Sergeant at Arms.

This historic arrangement now seems to have fallen foul of Labour's ongoing campaign to impose authoritarian policing measures, under the guise of the so-called "war on terror".

A climate of fear has been whipped up focusing on the danger posed by possible terrorist attacks that has been utilised to undermine or obviate long-established democratic rights. Naturally parliament itself cannot be excluded from this process.

The government had initiated a review of security at parliament—the first since 1973. After a meeting with Hain, Eliza Manningham-Butler, director-general of the security service MI5, and Sir John Stevens, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, were charged with drawing up new policing

proposals.

Their final report is due at the end of this month. According to reports, proposals include extra defences at the Commons, including bullet and blast-proof shields in front of the gallery where members of the public can watch parliamentary debates, additional surveillance cameras and more physical barriers to control access to the chamber.

Newspapers have also reported that it includes plans to arm police with stun guns and for a pontoon or barrage to be thrown across the Thames.

Central to the review are proposals for internal policing to be transferred from the Sergeant at Arms to a new Director of Security with authority across parliament and linked directly with the police and MI5.

Significantly, this option was rejected only days before the hunt protest and the *Sun*'s own efforts to discredit the security arrangements in the Commons by parliament's Joint Committee on Security.

Hain could not hide his pleasure at the turn in events. He seized on the hunt protest and the *Sun*'s "scoop" to insist that the new arrangements must go through.

"This is the age of the suicide terrorist and our security arrangements are antiquated. The House must act urgently together with the House of Lords and appoint a director of security with operational authority working directly to the Security Services and the Metropolitan Police," he railed.

Once again heaping praise on the *Sun*, Hain then claimed that "security services briefed me some time ago about intelligence they had about Al Qaeda operatives in Britain focusing on parliament".

Declining to give details of this intelligence, Hain continued, "What if—as the *Sun* has exposed—that had been a suicide terrorist? That is the horrifying reality we now face."

Hain's statement raises questions that demand answers. If he had indeed received intelligence reports on a possible terror attack on parliament, why had no one else apparently been briefed on the threat—including one must assume the unfortunate Sergeant at Arms? Either the warning was viewed as genuine and Hain should be held to account for a clear dereliction of duty, or he also did not take it seriously and only raises it now as a whip against those standing in the way of the government's plans.

Just as importantly, raising the threat of Islamic terrorists diverts attention from that fact that in both recent instances parliament's security was in fact compromised by scions of the establishment. The pro-hunt protesters are close friends of the Royal family and are suspected of having been aided by at least one "mole", possibly a sympathetic MP, whilst the *Sun*'s owner Rupert Murdoch is one of Blair's most prominent political supporters.

No one can rule out the possibility of collusion in either of the security breaches—in the first instance most likely by Conservative MPs seeking to embarrass the government, or—in the case of the *Sun* reporter's subsequent stunt—even from within the government by those seeking to underline the need for security arrangements to be overhauled.

The protestors, it should be noted, possessed what Hain admitted was "a great deal of expert knowledge of the labyrinth that the House of Commons is to strangers. Somebody knew exactly what they were doing." They were carrying a forged letter from two MPs; Conservative Louth and Horncastle MP Sir Peter Tapsell and Labour's Kerry Pollard. And the Tory MP Henry Bellingham has now admitted that his assistant gave one of the pro-hunt protestors, Otis Ferry, the son of Brian Ferry, a tour of the House of Commons after which he was taken to a terrace for drinks—just two days before he invaded the floor of parliament.

In any event the security failure is extraordinary and was not confined to the Commons security staff. Liberal Democrat MP Paul Keetch revealed that a member of the public had made repeated warnings to the police that a protestor had been seen making his way into parliament, disguised as a building worker, only to be ignored on each occasion. The man eventually rang the emergency services in an attempt to warn of a possible intrusion, too late to prevent it.

It is the government that has benefited from these ostensibly embarrassing events. They are being used to promote what has been described as "US-style, high profile" security arrangements in the capital. Immediately after the pro-hunting protest, the government agreed that the Metropolitan Police should take charge of security at parliament, and armed police began guarding the Palace of Westminster for the first time.

There are also indications that the security breaches will be used to clamp down on political protests, with Home Secretary David Blunkett said to be in favour of an outright ban on all demonstrations in Parliament Square.



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