

Britain: Queen's speech outlines assault on democratic rights

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The Queen's speech on November 23 outlined the Labour government's legislative programme for the next year and opened what is expected to be the last parliamentary session before a general election is held in May. It is indicative of its extreme right-wing character that there was barely a mention of any social measures among the 32 bills and eight draft bills. Instead the speech was a litany of one law and order proposal after another, which in aggregate represents the most fundamental attacks on democratic rights in British history.

Home Office security related legislation amounts to fully one third of the legislation in the speech.

Setting the tone for what followed, the Queen announced that the theme of the next parliamentary session would be "security and opportunity for all ... My Government recognises that we live in a time of global uncertainty, with an increased threat from international terrorism and organised crime."

Much of the legislation and all of the tenor of the government's propaganda apes that employed in the Republican presidential election campaign in the United States, with its emphasis on security and terror.

The Law Society, which represents solicitors in the UK, warned that the measures could be seen as a step "in the direction of a police state". The director of Liberty, Shami Chakrabarti, said that that the generations-old principle of innocent until proven guilty risked being eroded by the expected anti-crime legislation. He said, "This Home Secretary has not got a record of showing great deference for democratic values and the rule of law. We are understandably nervous about any suggestion that he is going to bring in new anti-terror laws."

The former shadow home secretary and Labour MP Roy Hattersley said the legislation is "too much in the

direction of authoritarianism and too little civil liberties".

All of these statements are correct in their estimation, but this authoritarian drive is the essential thrust of government policy and there will be no retreat. The legislative programme outlined in the speech is designed to whip up fear and to intimidate the electorate into voting for a Labour government as the only means to deal with the "imminent terrorist threat".

Following the announcements the Labour MP Peter Hain rejected criticism that the measures were an attack on civil liberties and democratic rights and declared with disdain, "If you are bombed by a terrorist, what is your liberty then? In the end, people have to be safe to enjoy their liberty."

Hain admitted that the measures were being announced now in time for a general election. "We are crowding out any space for [the Conservatives] on the security agenda and that will make for an interesting political year. Britain obviously is vulnerable to terrorist attack and you can't predict where it would come under any government. My point is if we are tough on crime and on terrorism as Labour is, then I think Britain will be safer under Labour, yes. The Tories and Liberal Democrats oppose lots of our measures against terrorism and lots of our measures in tackling crime."

The right-wing law and order legislation contained in the speech led a number of observers to comment on the dangers of the development of a police state in Britain. Indeed some pointed out that it seems that Home Secretary David Blunkett intends to make every crime, however minor, an arrestable offence. But the legislation goes much further than this in its erosion of democratic rights.

* Among the proposals listed in the speech were the

announcement of a (Draft) Counter Terrorism Bill. The legislation is to include sweeping new powers to implement trials without jury and new civil orders for people who could be arrested for being merely suspected of planning “terrorist” acts and who have not yet committed any offence. Blunkett said that the draft Bill would be produced in the new year.

* A new body called the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) that has been dubbed the “British FBI” is to be created. Surveillance is to be a large part of its remit and it is to be headed by former MI5 chief Sir Stephen Lander. The body will be allowed to use new powers such as use of evidence from phone tapping, plea bargaining for witnesses, and a witness protection programme. SOCA is to employ some 5,000 investigators to enforce the new powers available.

* The legislation prepares the way for the introduction of an identity card in Britain for the first time. The cards are being introduced ostensibly for the purpose of countering terrorism and identity fraud. Blunkett said that the cards should be compulsory in the UK as early as 2010, with voluntary cards being circulated well before this date. Biometric cards based on fingerprint, face shapes and iris scans will be phased in from 2007-8. The ID Card system includes establishing a central database holding information on every legal UK resident. The cards will also be used to prevent people from using specific services, such as benefit entitlement, if they do not have a valid ID card. Everyone applying for a new or renewed passport will be forced to pay a total of £85 (\$US160) for an ID card as well.

* There will be a further crackdown on young people with a draft youth justice bill. The bill proposes to increase community punishments for young offenders and includes more tagging, surveillance and supervision.

* A new criminal defence service bill will have an agenda to reduce spending on legal aid in criminal cases and return to a system of means-testing in magistrates’ court cases.

* Under proposals to combat “animal rights extremists”, the Serious Organised Crime Agency will have new powers to stop “extremists” harassing those engaged in animal research. The bill proposes to create a new offence of protesting outside homes in a way that causes “harassment, alarm or distress” to the residents.

* A new Drugs Bills will allow powers to prosecute drug addicts even if they are not in possession of supplies. People can be taken to court if traces of a banned substance are found in their bloodstream. The new laws also empower the police to give drugs tests to people arrested over minor crimes.

* Under a new Constitutional Reform Bill, the government intends to abolish the post of Lord Chancellor and create a new “supreme court” in place of the judicial committee of the House of Lords.

* The one significant social measure outlined was on education, and this was naturally of a right-wing character. The Education Bill will give schools greater ability to opt out of local authority control.

The legislation being proposed in the Queen’s Speech is an attempt to legitimise the “war on terror” and the ongoing occupation of Iraq, but also presages other such criminal adventures in the future.

Secondly the policies being proposed reveal a government that can offer nothing that is economically and socially progressive for the broad mass of the population and which rules exclusively in the interests of a narrow and enormously wealthy layer of society.

The Labour Party is today a party of big business that has enacted policies which could never have been contemplated, let alone introduced by previous Conservative governments. Unable to secure a popular basis for rule through economic measures to create social consensus, it instead emphasises terror, security and crime in order to whip the population into line while allowing for the ruthless suppression of growing political and social dissent.

The Queens’ Speech is thus a confirmation of the extremely polarised nature of social relations in Britain. What is being developed behind Labour’s invocation of law and order and anti-security is the type of authoritarian regime made necessary by the escalation of militarism abroad and economic war between the classes at home.



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