Attack on civil liberties intensifies after London bombing

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The British Labour government is advancing new repressive measures in the aftermath of the July 7 London bombings.

In a speech to the National Police Forum on July 16, Prime Minister Tony Blair called for a "battle of ideas and hearts and minds" to defeat what he called the fanatical beliefs and distortion of Islam that lay behind the London suicide bombings.

"In the end, it is by the power of argument, debate, true religious faith and true legitimate politics that we will defeat this threat," he concluded.

This was all that was in evidence of a political or ideological struggle, however. As always, Blair's flowery rhetoric is only window dressing for further attacks on civil rights in the name of pursuing the "war on terror."

Sweeping new laws are to be introduced that would ban "indirect incitement of terrorism" and make it illegal to provide or undergo "terrorist training."

Home Secretary Charles Clarke wrote to opposition spokesmen on July 15 outlining a proposed bill to be presented to the House of Commons when Parliament resumes in the autumn after its summer recess. It is expected to receive parliamentary ratification by next summer.

To avoid allegations of a knee-jerk reaction to the bombings, he stressed that the new counterterrorism legislation was already indicated in Labour's election manifesto.

The most dangerous aspect of the new legislation from the standpoint of civil liberties is a new law that would make "indirect incitement to commit terrorist acts" a criminal offence. Direct incitement is already a crime. The problem here is how "incitement" is defined.

In one of the few critical reports in the media, *Sunday Herald* correspondent Pennie Taylor asks, "What, precisely, is 'indirect incitement to terrorism'? Might it, for instance, be using the words: "As long as young people feel they have got no hope but to blow themselves up, you are never going to make progress'?"

Taylor points out that the quoted passage is from Blair's wife, Cherie, three years ago, speaking in reference to a Palestinian medical charity. "At the time there was mild outcry, but if she said the same thing now she could be facing imprisonment," Taylor writes.

The legislation will make it an offence to "endorse" suicide bombers, either publicly or privately. But what exactly constitutes "endorsement" is left extremely vague. When asked what might be construed as indirect incitement, Home Office Minister Hazel Blears said, "In some cases, the tone might tell you whether there is an intention to glorify [terrorist acts]".

Other aspects of the new legislation will make it an offence to receive "terrorist training" and allow people regarded as "undesirable" to be denied entry to Britain. The latter point has provoked concern over how it will be applied, particularly in light of the news that Zaki Badawi, chairman of the British Council of Mosques, who holds an honorary knighthood, was turned away from America last week with no explanation.

Other proposals already in place include control orders to allow police and security agencies to track suspects, including bans on who they can contact or meet, as well as electronic tagging and curfew orders that amount to being placed under house arrest. Identity cards, which have provoked widespread opposition both on grounds of costs and civil liberties, will be brought forward in the new parliament to take advantage of the political climate in the aftermath of the London bombings.

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UK ministers have also been seeking to push through new laws on data retention that were rejected by the European Council.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Home Secretary Clarke used trips to Brussels to try to persuade members of the European Parliament to push through laws on data retention. The draft legislation, put forward in the aftermath of the Madrid train bombings last year by individual member states rather than the European Commission, would require communications service providers to keep user and traffic data for a minimum of a year and possibly longer.

The proposal was widely considered to be unworkable, expensive to implement, invasive and unnecessary. Its legality was also questioned, given that it conflicts with the Data Protection Act which states that companies and organisations must not keep unnecessary personal information.

According to a report in the *Guardian*, Clarke said, "The question of civil liberties has to be treated in a proportionate way. It is a different civil liberty question whether you have CCTV or not, or whether you retain telecommunications data, or whether you have biometrics on an ID card, to whether somebody is tortured in a country to which they are sent."

On July 12, Straw spoke to the European foreign affairs committee. He called for "a rebalancing of (where) the line between the rights of individuals and the rights of societies should lie."

He called on the European Union to rapidly implement its counter-terrorism action plan, ensure more effective police cooperation between member states and accelerate moves to give the authorities access to telephone and Internet data. "I believe that, provided there are proper safeguards, no one's civil liberties are threatened by retention and access to data, but the protection of everybody is more greatly enhanced," he said."

The meeting was also addressed by Chancellor Gordon Brown, who is pushing for powers to seize financial assets. "All 25 finance ministers affirmed as one today that just as there can be no safe haven for terrorists, so we will try to ensure that there is no safe haven for those who finance terrorism," he said.

Britain is leading the way in attacking civil liberties, but other European states are not far behind. French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has vowed to deport "radical" Muslim clerics. Speaking after a meeting last week with his Spanish counterpart in Madrid, Sarkozy said he would seek the expulsion of imams in France "whose sermons are radical."

France has used a so-called safety clause in the Schengen open-border agreement between EU countries in order to close its borders. "If we don't reinforce border controls when around 50 people die in London, I don't know when I would," Sarkozy said.

Italy is planning to bring forward new measures, including extending the time a suspect may be held without charge from 12 to 24 hours, easier deportation, awarding residence permits to illegal immigrants who help police and easier access to Internet and mobile phone operators' data banks. The government is also seeking the right to question suspects without their lawyers being present.

Austria has said that from next January anyone coming under "sustained suspicion" of terrorist links may be immediately deported. The measure reportedly will apply to Muslim clergymen whose sermons represent a "danger to public security."

In Germany, Justice Minister Brigitte Zypries has called for cameras to be installed in underground railway stations and the creation of "anti-terrorism files" that would collect data about people suspected of carrying out terrorist activities.

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