

Blair lays down framework for police state in Britain

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
10 August 2005

The measures announced August 5 by Prime Minister Tony Blair under the pretext of combating terrorism show how fully his government views democratic rights to be incompatible with its warmongering internationally and its pro-business agenda at home.

Blair used his monthly press conference to announce measures openly directed against immigrants and Muslims, but which set the stage for attacks on the right to free speech and for the criminalisation of all forms of political dissent.

Prior to Blair's appearance, Home Secretary Charles Clarke had drawn up new grounds for deportation and exclusion for what the government arbitrarily deems to be a list of "unacceptable behaviours." These measures encompassed not merely those involved with terrorist groups or those charged with financing terrorism, activities already proscribed, but included anyone seen as presenting an *indirect* threat to national security, public order, the rule of law in the UK or the UK's good relations with a third country.

Any non-British citizen or naturalised British citizen living anywhere in the world, using any means whatsoever—including writing, producing, publishing or distributing material, public speaking including preaching, running a website, or using a position of responsibility such as teacher, community or youth leader—to express views which the government considers illegitimate can be targeted.

The list of unacceptable behaviours includes:

Fomenting terrorism or encouraging others to carry out terrorist acts; justifying or glorifying terrorism, fomenting other serious criminal activity or provoking others to serious criminal acts; fostering hatred that may lead to intra-community violence in the UK; and advocating violence in furtherance of particular beliefs.

Anyone not covered by these sweeping criteria could still face deportation or exclusion from the country if he is considered by the government to express "extreme views" that are "in conflict with the UK's culture of tolerance."

In announcing his intent to push through these measures in the next parliament, Blair made clear that he would tolerate no constitutional or legal impediment.

"These issues will, of course, be tested in the courts," he stated, explaining that previous attempts by the government to deport people back to repressive regimes were struck down for contravening Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). This states, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

Blair dismissed such considerations, claiming that following the July 7 bombings in London, "the circumstances of our national security have now self-evidently changed."

If the judiciary attempted to block deportations, he would "legislate further, including, if necessary amending the Human Rights Act," which formally commits Britain to upholding the ECHR.

Blair indicated just how extensive the government's campaign of

surveillance would be, adding bookshops to the list of targets previously cited by the home secretary. He also made clear that anti-terrorism legislation criminalising the "condoning or glorifying of terrorism" would have effect anywhere in the world and would be applied retrospectively.

A new court procedure is to be established in which a pre-trial hearing could take place in a closed non-jury court. The government is also sympathetic to police requests that the time limit for detaining those suspected of terrorism without charge be extended from 14 days to three months.

A number of radical Islamic organisations are to be proscribed, including Hizb-ut-Tahrir. This group has never been directly linked to terrorism. Blair declared that the government would "also examine the grounds of proscription to widen them."

New powers will be brought forward to close mosques and other places of worship "used as a centre for fomenting extremism" and a list of Imams drawn up who are to be banned from preaching in Britain.

British nationals not covered by these measures will face the extended use of the control orders announced previously, which amount to a form of house arrest and prohibit any social or political contact not specifically authorised by the state.

With these measures, Blair has laid out the framework for a police state.

Although carried out in the name of the fight against terrorism, there is no responsibility to prove a direct connection with terrorist acts or groups before individuals can be deported or imprisoned and organisations proscribed.

The all-embracing character of what is now proclaimed as unacceptable behaviour means that anyone opposing the British occupation of Iraq, expressing support for the Palestinian struggle, or supporting opposition groups in Saudi Arabia and a host of other regimes allied to Britain could be criminalised. No direct action is required to fall under the sway of these measures. No evidence is ruled out as too flimsy. The Orwellian concept of "thought crime" is to be made the basis of British law.

"Let no one be in any doubt. The rules of the game are changing," Blair said.

This statement epitomises the prime minister's utter contempt for democratic rights. Constitutional safeguards protecting civil liberties established over hundreds of years are to be swept aside. A British citizen no longer has any inalienable right to freedom of speech or worship, or protection from arbitrary arrest. All power will now rest with the government.

Even the independence enjoyed by the judiciary, once considered essential to the long-term stability of capitalist rule, is to be challenged. Following the press conference, former Home Secretary David Blunkett warned that the government would not tolerate any judicial attempt to overturn the new anti-terrorist measures. He insisted that the government, and not the courts, were answerable for national security and that "upholding liberty is not a suicide pact."

Once again, as with 9/11 in the United States, we are told that because

of the London bombings of July 7, “everything has changed.” After an admittedly horrible crime, in which 56 people died, it has supposedly become impossible to preserve democratic and constitutional norms that survived two world wars, the threat of Nazi invasion and a terrorist campaign by the IRA that lasted more than three decades.

This does not withstand scrutiny. By the government’s own admission, the influence of the Islamic fundamentalist groups is minimal and the terrorist outrage of July 7, and the subsequent failed bombings of July 21, were carried out by individuals who were not members of a sophisticated terrorist outfit, but were animated by political and religious conviction.

Moreover, the government has already granted itself massive powers to clamp down on Islamic fundamentalists, the activities of which, as a number of media reports have made clear, are well known to the security services.

More fundamentally, it is government policy that is responsible for the increased terror threat. It is Britain’s participation in the invasion of Afghanistan and the illegal war against Iraq that has inflamed the anger of young Muslims and provided a seedbed in which the reactionary influence of the Islamic fundamentalists can germinate.

Although dressing up its repressive measures as a necessary defence of Britain’s “tolerant” society, Blair can provide no democratic channel through which such political disaffection can find expression.

This is not an issue confined to British Muslims. Blair’s government rules on behalf of a narrow financial oligarchy, which has accrued its vast wealth through the exploitation of the world’s resources and peoples. That is why the government can tolerate no opposition to its predatory policies in the Middle East from any quarter.

Matters cannot end there. The government’s foreign policy is directly related to its domestic political agenda. Under Blair’s Labour government, social inequality has widened to unprecedented levels, as welfare and public services have been gutted and wage levels slashed in order to generate super-profits and tax breaks for the major transnational corporations. This agenda has proven to be incompatible with the preservation of democratic norms.

Blair heads a government that has little popular support and is fully aware of the hostility it has engendered both internationally and within Britain. Yet he cannot contemplate the type of reformist measures previously used to secure a measure of political consensus, and so must rely on police methods.

The announcement of these latest proposals follows the state execution of Jean Charles de Menezes in a London subway carriage on July 22. Following the gunning down of this innocent man, the police confirmed that they now operate under shoot-to-kill policies first implemented in Northern Ireland. Since then, every day has brought fresh revelations that the techniques perfected during “the Troubles” are now to be used to police mainland Britain.

At the height of its power, British imperialism carried out its most brutal crimes overseas in order to maintain its rule over the colonial masses, but was able to use the fruits of empire to secure a degree of social peace at home. The decline of British imperialism and the crisis facing capitalism on a world scale mean that this political distinction must now be expunged. The ruling elite must resort to force of arms to enforce its wishes in London, just as surely as it does in Baghdad.

This accounts for the extraordinary political consensus of the opposition parties behind the government’s measures. Blair told the press that since July 7, “To be fair, the Conservative leadership has responded with a genuine desire to work together for the good of the country, as have the Liberal Democrats.”

Neither party has disappointed Blair. Conservative leader Michael Howard said his party has been calling for the measures for years, adding, “It is important a united front is maintained in the face of the terror threat.”

Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy said that Blair’s announcement “put the cross-party consensus under serious strain,” but promised only that his party would “reserve our position until we have consulted properly ourselves.”

Most of the media has also been supportive, with the *Telegraph* expressing its hope that Blair was “firing the first shots in an arguably overdue battle for supremacy between the legislative and judicial branches of government—with implications that go well beyond counter-terrorism or immigration policy.”

Equally significant is the feeble character of the protests Blair’s announcement has evoked from the liberal press and civil rights groups, which focus on concerns that the Blair government’s authoritarianism will endanger national unity and political consensus.

In a society riven by class antagonisms, such appeals to national unity only hand the initiative to the government. The defence of democratic rights demands a struggle against the capitalist ruling elite that launched war on Iraq in order to seize control of its oil resources, and that now seek to eliminate all possibility of opposing their criminal actions.

All of those who oppose militarism and war must renew and reinvigorate a political campaign of protests and demonstrations, linking the demand for an end to the occupation of Iraq with the fight to preserve civil liberties. Such a movement must demand that Blair and all those responsible for authoring the war be held legally and politically accountable for its consequences, including the July 7 terror attack and the draconian measures enacted in its wake.

To end the threat of terrorism, it is necessary to end the imperialist policies that have created the conditions for the growth of terrorist movements among the most impoverished and oppressed populations in the Middle East, Central Asia and elsewhere. British capitalism has long supported semi-feudal despotisms, such as the Saudi sheikdom, in order to secure its access to oil and its other strategic interests, while defending the brutal suppression of the Palestinian people by the Israeli state. Its illegal invasion and subjugation of Iraq represents the outcome of this imperialist policy.

To end the predatory policies of British imperialism, it is above all necessary to establish the political independence of the working class by building a mass socialist movement that fights for the international unity of the working class.



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