

# London bombings trigger massive assault on democratic rights

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The July 7 bombings in London and the failed bombing attempts on July 21 have been seized upon by the Blair government to implement an unprecedented assault on democratic rights.

The country that long prided itself on a tradition of unarmed policing has become one in which armed police are empowered to act with impunity.

London, in particular, has been placed under conditions resembling a state of siege. The consequences were made horrifyingly apparent on July 22 when police executed 27-year-old Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes with seven bullets to the head in a subway carriage, without warning or cause.

A brief note of regret from police was followed by Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair's statement that more innocent people could be killed.

Subsequently, armed raids have been conducted throughout the capital and in parts of the South and the West Midlands in what has been described as largest police operation since the Second World War.

In total, 37 people have been arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, of whom 20 remain in custody. The rest have been released without charge.

On July 29, police carried out a series of raids in the hunt for the "would-be suicide bombers" deemed to be responsible for the failed explosive attempts on July 21. In several areas across the capital, buildings were evacuated and streets cordoned off.

During the most high profile raid on a housing estate in West London, residents reported hearing loud bangs and seeing armed police, some in balaclavas, surround the area and fire CS gas into a flat before taking two men into custody.

The *Guardian* reported that soldiers from the SAS were present "to offer 'technical assistance' to the police."

"The squadron is ready for deployment at three hours' notice anywhere in the country if the police or MI5 suspect that armed terrorists are in a building, and is understood to have moved to a secret location in London," the newspaper continued.

A third man was arrested in a simultaneous raid, also in West London. That evening, another was arrested in Rome.

On July 30, police announced that all four suspected of the July 21 incidents—Yasin Hassan Omar, Muktar Said Ibrahim, Ramzi Mohammed and Osman Hussain—were in custody.

Even so, there has been no let-up in police operations. "London faces lockdown," the *Times* of London reported approvingly August 1, as another week began with thousands of police armed with machine guns patrolling the capital's streets and subway network. Scotland Yard has said this is necessary to "test the resources" and "reassure a

nervous public."

This huge police deployment has been accompanied by the revival of the notorious "stop and search" (SUS) laws, targeted at black and Asian males. Defending policing based on racial profiling, British Transport Police Constable Ian Johnston demanded, "We should not bottle out over this. We should not waste time searching old white ladies." Home Office Minister Hazel Blears said it was "absolutely the right thing for the police to do."

The unprecedented power now wielded by police has not been questioned by any of the main political parties or by the media, nor subjected to parliamentary scrutiny.

Even before Parliament went into recess on July 21, an unparalleled degree of cross-party unity had been established. Praising Prime Minister Tony Blair, Conservative leader Michael Howard and Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy made clear they were prepared to drop their earlier objections to proposed new anti-terror laws, which include the severe curtailment of freedom of speech.

Writing in the *Independent*, Steve Richards commented, "[T]he Prime Minister's style of leadership is formalised. He leads a national coalition against terror."

Richards is indifferent to the implications of what amounts to a de facto national government. In a subsequent comment, he insisted that it is not "illiberal for the state to curtail free speech in protection of its citizens."

"Moreover, it is wrong to assert that Tony Blair is an authoritarian," Richards went on. He is only "authoritarian from time to time."

The very real threat posed to civil liberties by these developments is underscored by the draconian powers already accrued to the state over the last period under the guise of the "war on terror."

The role of the Civil Contingencies Committee in events of the last month, for example, has only been noted in passing by the media, and then in the most flattering light, almost as if it were an emergency relief agency.

In fact, this shadowy body (nicknamed Cobra), has the power to suspend civil liberties and impose military rule through the Civil Contingencies Act that came into effect late last year.

Dubbed Britain's version of the US Patriot Act, it enables the government to declare a state of emergency without a parliamentary vote and to introduce virtually unlimited "emergency regulations" under the Royal Prerogative, again without recourse to Parliament. It also enables the Defence Council—a body comprised of ministers, senior civil servants and military top brass—to deploy the armed services without prior parliamentary debate or approval.

Commenting at the time, the civil liberties organisation Statewatch warned that the act "would allow governments enormous discretion

and allow them to mix ongoing business in normal times with powers that are intended to deal with peacetime emergencies.

“This new ‘normality’ could see parts of cities or whole towns subject to exceptional laws and controls in the same way that emergency laws have been in place in Northern Ireland for more than thirty years.”

At a press conference immediately following the July 7 bombings, Blair’s official spokesman said he was “unaware of any proposals at this stage” to impose emergency powers under the Act.

The *Observer* reported that initial discussions between police and Cobra on July 7 “covered whether to summon the 7,000-strong Civil Contingencies Reaction Force, made up of reservists, to the streets of London. Despite the chaos in central London, it was not deemed essential and control fell to the police.”

Blair reportedly chaired the last Cobra meeting on July 21, involving senior ministers and police and intelligence chiefs, immediately following the failed bomb attempts. It is not known whether the meeting agreed to invoke the act at this point, as no details of its discussions have been made publicly available.

Whatever the technicalities, there is no doubting that parts of the country have been made subject to “exceptional laws and controls.”

In its leader July 30, the *Times* opined, “Living with terror Britain must accept that the abnormal will become normal.”

The *Times’* complacent justification for the sweeping abrogation of civil liberties does not withstand scrutiny.

None of the measures now being implemented in Britain were deemed necessary during “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland. This was despite the 1979 assassinations of former Chief of the Defence Staff Lord Mountbatten and shadow Northern Ireland Secretary Airey Neave at the House of Commons, and the attempt to kill almost the entire Conservative cabinet in the 1984 Brighton bombing.

Just last December, Britain’s law lords rejected the government’s argument for imprisoning foreign nationals accused of terrorist involvement without trial.

Explaining their decision, Lord Hoffman stated, “Freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention is a quintessential British liberty, enjoyed by the inhabitants of this country when most of the population of Europe could be thrown into prison at the whim of their rulers.

“Terrorist crime, serious as it is, does not threaten our institutions of government or our existence as a civil community.

“The real threat to the life of the nation, in the sense of a people living in accordance with its traditional laws and political values, comes not from terrorism but from laws such as these.”

Blair has made clear he will use the July bombings to try and overturn that ruling.

The fact that the police and government have been able to implement their security measures so quickly underscores that most of these measures had been made ready some time ago, and were just awaiting the appropriate pretext. Scotland Yard has admitted that its policy of shoot-to-kill, for example, was put into place two years ago.

The resort to “emergency” government and the militarisation of society have far more to do with the buildup of social and political tensions within the UK than with any terrorist threat.

Britain is sharply polarised along class lines. In recent decades, successive governments have carried out a major redistribution of wealth from working people to a tiny, privileged elite.

Welfare, health care and other essential services which millions of workers and their families depend upon have been systematically gutted in order to provide tax breaks for the rich and the major

corporations, and decent paying jobs replaced by low-wage, sweated labour.

This has been accompanied by a law-and-order offensive targeted at the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society.

Ethnic minorities have been particularly adversely affected by these conditions—their situation made all the more precarious by the anti-immigrant diatribes of the official parties and the media as they seek a scapegoat for the unfolding social catastrophe.

The putrefaction of the official workers movement, which has reached its apogee in Blair’s Labour government, has left millions politically disenfranchised.

Whether or not any of those involved in July’s incidents had links to foreign organisations, it is clear that the profound sense of alienation engendered by these conditions, combined with anger and outrage at the Blair government’s participation in Washington’s illegal war against Iraq—under conditions where there is no mass-based progressive alternative through which to challenge the existing set-up—has created the climate for terrorist outrages.

The emergency measures now being imposed will do nothing to change this situation, much less protect the British people. This can only be achieved by ending the policies that have given rise to terror attacks.

Opposition to imperialist war must be linked to the defence of all the social gains and democratic rights of working people. Alongside the demand for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq must be the call for an end to police state measures and the convening of a genuinely independent inquiry into the events of the last weeks. Such an inquiry would focus on the political responsibility of the Blair government, the media and the entire political establishment for the criminal aggression in Iraq, which was launched on the basis of lies and constitutes a conspiracy against the people of the Middle East and the working class of Britain itself.



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