

Britain: anti-terror measures threaten basic rights

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The anti-terror measures announced by Home Secretary Charles Clarke on August 25 represent a fundamental attack on democratic rights.

Clarke outlined a list of “unacceptable behaviours” that dramatically extends the government’s ability to deport foreign nationals whom it accuses of supporting terrorism.

Using the justification of the July 7 terror bombings, the government is to extend the powers granted to the home secretary under the 1971 Immigration Act to deport not only those who are members and supporters of terrorist groups, but anyone who “glorifies” or “justifies” terrorism.

The most significant forms of “unacceptable behaviour” are:

- * fomenting, justifying or glorifying terrorist violence in furtherance of particular beliefs
- * seeking to provoke others to terrorist acts
- * fomenting other serious criminal activity or seeking to provoke others to serious criminal acts
- * fostering hatred which might lead to inter-community violence in the UK

The immediate targets of the legislation are a number of radical clerics and Islamic political activists who have not been directly connected with terrorist activity. This prerequisite for deportation is bypassed by the simple expediency of outlawing the expression of political views deemed an anathema by the government.

The measures have been accompanied by the banning of the Islamist group Hizb ut Tahrir that publicly professes a commitment to non-violent change.

The government has made clear its intention to deport people to countries where they may face persecution, torture and even death. This is in defiance of international conventions, including the European Convention on Human Rights, on which Britain’s own Human Rights Act is based.

The Blair government claims to be negotiating the “necessary assurances” from a number of countries with a record of human rights violations to prevent any ill-treatment of deportees. It has threatened a conflict with the judiciary if there is any legal challenge to these measures,

and to amend the Human Rights Act if necessary.

The full extent of the government’s appetite for repressive powers was indicated by what it had to leave out of the draft proposals. Clarke’s initial statement of intent in the days following July 7 proposed to prohibit the expression of views that “the government considers to be extreme and that conflict with the UK’s culture of tolerance.”

This sweeping generalisation has now been omitted. Nevertheless, Clarke insisted that the amended list of unacceptable behaviours is “indicative rather than exhaustive.”

The measures were criticised by United Nations special rapporteur on torture Manfred Nowak, who threatened to cite Britain for human rights violations. Nowak said that the British government’s assurances do not alter the fact that its plan to deport people to countries that practice torture violates the European Convention on Human Rights and “reflects a tendency in Europe to circumvent the international obligation not to deport anybody if there is a serious risk that he or she might be subjected to torture.”

He continued, “The fact that such assurances are sought shows in itself that the sending country perceives a serious risk of the deportee being subjected to torture or ill treatment upon arrival.”

The government’s response to Nowak’s criticisms was just as bellicose as its threats to take on Britain’s judges. Clarke accused the UN of being more concerned with the rights of terrorists than with those of their victims. He told ITN News, “[T]he human rights of those people who were blown up on the Tube in London on July 7 are, to be quite frank, more important than the human rights of the people who committed those acts.... I wish the UN would look at human rights in the round, rather than simply focusing all the time on the terrorist.”

Clarke’s statement is a flat-out lie. His measures are aimed at people who are not guilty of terrorism, but who hold views now considered unacceptable. He is seeking to eliminate the specific right to asylum, one that by its nature is extended to those whose views are considered

impermissible in their country of origin.

Previous government legislation created a list of proscribed organisations, made it an offence to plan terrorism in other countries, and established the right to deport those who posed a *direct* threat to “national security...public order...or the UK’s good relations with a third country.” Now the government can target those considered to be an indirect threat, withdraw their right to asylum, and send them back to be tortured.

So sweeping are the government’s criteria that anyone expressing political support for a struggle against British imperialism or its allies—whether the United States or a host of despotic regimes in the Middle East and Africa—could find themselves charged with terror offences.

This can impact on those who have no sympathy whatsoever with fundamentalism or terrorism.

The betrayals of the Stalinist and social democratic organisations and the collapse of secular nationalist movements have led some desperate and oppressed peoples to resort to terror. Under the latest measures, to even point this out could subject a person to state sanctions.

Though the specific proposals are aimed at foreign nationals, the de facto laying down of a new category of thought crime represents a fundamental threat to every British citizen. If the government can decide what opinions are legally permissible regarding its foreign policy, then what will prevent it from dictating what can be said about any other issue it declares to be a question affecting national security?

All those concerned with democratic rights should reject the claim that Clarke’s measures are justified by the threat of terrorism. It is the British government that bears primary political responsibility for the July 7 bombings and is creating the conditions for further atrocities.

Prime Minister Tony Blair dragged Britain into an illegal war of aggression against Iraq that has cost tens of thousands of lives. He did so on the basis of shameless lies. It is this that has facilitated the poisonous growth of Islamic fundamentalism, particularly amongst disaffected and angry youth. To target clerics and Islamic activists for persecution and deportation will only further inflame the situation.

Having destabilised the Middle East and inflamed ethnic and religious tensions within the UK, the government now seeks to prevent any expression of opposition to its politically criminal agenda by citing the very dangers it has created.

The terrorist threat is being cynically employed as a pretext for implementing measures associated with a police state—where rights once considered inalienable are made dependent on the discretion of the state and freedom of speech no longer exists.

The greatest danger to the welfare and security of the British people comes from the government, not a relatively small number of religious extremists. Blair, in alliance with the Bush administration in the US, is leading an international offensive on the part of a financial oligarchy to plunder the world’s resources and destroy the living standards of working people. This political agenda, which impoverishes millions in order to enrich a fabulously wealthy elite, is incompatible with the maintenance of democratic norms.

Working people must resolutely champion the democratic rights of all, or they will be disarmed in the struggle that must be waged against war and the ongoing offensive against their own political freedoms and livelihoods. One need only recall that the war against Iraq was carried out in the name of combating a terrorist state. Under the new guidelines, the millions of anti-war protestors who were denounced as “appeasers” and apologists for Saddam Hussein could have faced legal sanctions.

To oppose these dangers, the mass movement that developed against the Iraq war must be renewed in a political offensive against the Labour government. The demand must be raised for an immediate end to the occupation of Iraq, the prosecution of those responsible and the repeal of all the repressive measures implemented in the name of the so-called “war on terror.”

Such a counteroffensive requires the building of a new party of the working class dedicated to the eradication of the profit system that is rooted in class oppression and imperialist exploitation. This is the programme advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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