

British government announces new attacks on civil liberties

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On September 15, Home Secretary Charles Clarke announced details of the proposed draft Terrorism Bill that represents a fundamental attack on democratic rights and civil liberties. The government plans to push the bill through Parliament as soon as Christmas.

Among its proposals are measures to extend the period police can hold “terror suspects” without charge from two weeks to three months.

A law will be passed outlawing the “glorification” of terrorism and the introduction of an offence of committing “acts preparatory to terrorism.” This introduces the Orwellian concept of “thought crime” into British law.

Further provisions will prosecute “giving or receiving terror training” and make “indirect incitement” of terrorism an offence. The new legislation will give the government further powers to proscribe organisations deemed to be glorifying terrorism and the right to close “extremist” bookshops.

The government is also considering the use of phone-tap evidence in courts.

The legislation is both retroactive and sweeping in its provisions. Anyone who “glorifies, exalts or celebrates” any terrorist attack committed over the last 20 years can be jailed for up to five years. The home secretary himself will also decide which events are not permitted to be “glorified.” Theoretically, anyone supporting the IRA’s bombing campaign against Britain, supporters of the Palestinian struggle against Israel or even the ANC’s fight against apartheid could be targeted.

Clarke’s draft bill builds on measures the government drew up in August when they proposed new grounds under which people can be deported and excluded from the UK. These were to be ordered on the basis of a list of sweeping “unacceptable behaviours” drawn up by the government. These include fomenting terrorism or encouraging others to carry out terrorist acts; justifying or glorifying terrorism; fomenting other serious criminal activity or provoking others to commit serious criminal acts; fostering hatred that may lead to intra-community violence in the UK; and advocating violence in furtherance of particular beliefs.

At that time Clarke also proposed deportation or exclusion from the country of anyone that the government considered to

express “extreme views” that are “in conflict with the UK’s culture of tolerance.”

Hours before Clarke announced the new draft bill, he authorised the arrest of seven Algerians who were seized in dawn raids on their homes in London and Manchester. Those arrested were then taken to prison and face deportation. Last month nine other people were also seized on the basis of being a threat to “national security.” A total of 16 people now face deportation to Algeria, despite facing the threat of torture and death.

The government has refused to detail the supposed security threat posed by the seven, or even to reveal their names. In a cursory statement Clarke announced that the presence of those arrested “is not conducive to the public good for reasons of national security.”

The home secretary spuriously used the July 7 London bombings to claim that deportations were necessary. “As, unfortunately, we saw in July, there are individuals who are going about the course of trying to threaten the civil liberties of this country by terrorist or potential terrorist attacks. To the extent we know about those ... it’s our job to defend ourselves against that, as vigorously as we possibly can.”

Not a shred of evidence has been presented to support the claim that any of those arrested was involved in planning terrorist offences. And under the draft bill the government is not obliged to offer such proof.

Amnesty International was joined by other human rights groups in objecting to the men being sent to Algeria, which they said has an “appalling record of torturing prisoners.... Detainees must be allowed to properly challenge the grounds for their deportation, including the evidence on which the Home Secretary has made his decision to deport them. This is particularly important because of the risk that the UK authorities may rely on secret evidence.”

Britain does not even have a deportation agreement with Algeria under which the latter agrees that it will not mistreat those sent there from the UK.

In contrast, the right-wing media was supportive of the proposals outlined by Clarke. On September 16, *Daily Express* columnist John Twomey wrote an article entitled “Asylum seekers seized in terror raids. How long before they’re all

booted out?”

For its part, the liberal *Guardian* editorialized, “The retreat from the rule of law—despite the enactment of the Human Rights Act—has been the deepest flaw of the Blair administration.” Nevertheless, it continued, “Some retreat on civil rights was obviously necessary in the wake of this summer’s terrorist attacks.”

The arrest of the seven Algerians was timed to reinforce Clarke’s claim that the terrorist threat requires extraordinary and undemocratic measures to be taken. But the government also hoped to sweep one of its more blatant lies in the run-up to the Iraq war under the carpet.

Among those being currently detained are four men who were defendants at the centre of the now infamous “ricin terror plot” and subsequent lengthy trial.

On January 5, 2003, police raided a flat in Wood Green, north London and seized what was described as a “poisons laboratory,” including “traces” of ricin. In a subsequent raid in Manchester, a police officer was stabbed to death by Algerian Kemal Bourgas, who was later charged as the head of the alleged “terrorist cell.”

On April 12 this year the six-month-long Old Bailey criminal court case of the men collapsed. Four were found not guilty of conspiracy and the other four acquitted after the prosecution offered no evidence. The eight men were acquitted of plotting to manufacture the deadly ricin toxin. And it emerged during the case that no ricin was ever found in the raided flat.

Bourgas had been previously convicted of murder. He was also convicted of conspiring to cause a public nuisance. He did possess notes on how to make ricin poison, but drawn from Internet sources identified with American right-wing extremists rather than Al Qaeda, as had been alleged.

The so-called “ricin terror plot” played a notorious and critical role in the lies and propaganda of both the US and UK government in their preparation for the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Just one month earlier, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced to Parliament that the newly discovered “ricin terror plot” was “powerful evidence of the continuing terrorist threat.”

US Secretary of State Colin Powell cited the case in his presentation to the United Nations Security Council. Powell claimed that the ricin case in Britain represented a “sinister nexus between Iraq and the Al Qaeda terrorist network” that was plotting to conduct “poison and explosive attacks” throughout Europe. In other interviews Powell repeatedly claimed that the UK cell was connected with Jordanian-born Islamic fundamentalist Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who was said to be directing terrorist plots from Iraq with Saddam Hussein’s tacit blessing.

These lies were part of an orchestrated campaign by the UK and US to claim that the threat of “weapons of mass destruction” and Baghdad’s alleged support for terrorist cells necessitated war in Iraq.

Any hope on the government’s part that the re-arrest of the men found innocent by the Old Bailey would draw a line under its claims of a ricin plot have backfired.

On September 16 the *Independent* reported that “Vital evidence in a terror case that was used by Tony Blair to justify the war with Iraq was withheld by Britain’s top chemical weapons laboratory.

“Tests demonstrating that no ricin was found at a flat linked to a gang suspected of planning a poison attack on the London Underground in January 2003 were not disclosed to police and ministers by officials at Porton Down.”

The article added, “A spokeswoman for the Defence Science and Technological Laboratory (DSTL), where the tests were done, said yesterday that officials at the establishment knew the results of the final tests three weeks after police had raided the flat in Wood Green, north London, on 5 January, 2003,” but that a “breakdown in communication” meant this information was not passed to the police for another 51 days.

On January 5, 2003 an “indicative test” had suggested that there were traces of the toxin at the flat in Wood Green and that this was the information cited to justify the existence of a poison factory.

The article continued, “[I]t became clear, as early as 8 January, that the apparent traces were insufficient to be classed as ricin. Scientists received confirmation of this on 28 January, but police were not informed officially until 20 March—51 days later.”

The *Independent* points to the obvious significance of this date—the day that the United States and Britain invaded Iraq.

On their face value these disclosures raise important questions as to the false basis on which the Iraq war was justified. But the official explanation that incompetence at Britain’s top chemical warfare facility led to a failure to inform the police or the government that there was no ricin in the flat for at least 51 days (or, more accurately, 71 days) is not credible. Nor does this explain why even afterwards this fact remained buried as far as the public was concerned until the Old Bailey trial two years later—a trial that was allowed to proceed despite no substantive evidence of a crime. Once again the facts point towards the clear possibility of a government cover-up, of which the arrest of the four Algerians on September 15 is a part.



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