

Oppose Blair's police-state measures

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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What Prime Minister Tony Blair called a “watershed” in legal history is the government’s laying down of the juridical framework for a police state in Britain.

Spearheaded by the new draft Prevention of Terrorism Bill, a raft of legislation is to be brought before parliament abrogating the right to free speech, habeas corpus—protection from unlawful detention—and the presumption of innocence upon which all legal and democratic principles have hitherto rested.

Blair has declared that the “rules of the game have changed” and that the police must be able to implement “summary justice.”

This statement is truly chilling, coming less than three months after armed plainclothes police summarily executed an innocent Brazilian immigrant worker, Jean Charles de Menezes, in a London subway station.

Taken in aggregate, the government’s forthcoming proposals allow internment without trial, criminalise the mere expression of opinion deemed to be unacceptable by the Home Secretary, allow arbitrary arrest and sentencing by the police and allow people to be evicted, denied benefits and thrown onto the streets. Moreover, Blair has promised that the police will be given whatever additional powers they demand, whether to supposedly combat terrorism or deal with rising crime and anti-social behaviour.

The most high-profile change contained in the anti-terror bill is an extension of the period in which a suspect may be held without charge from 14 days to three months. It will also make illegal the “glorification of the preparation or commission of terrorist acts”—an offence so vague that it effectively establishes a category of thought crime under which the government will be able to arbitrarily criminalise political dissent.

Just how much of a catch-all is being developed is indicated by recent events. This week, 10 suspected terrorists of Iraqi descent were arrested in dawn raids. Security forces said the arrests were linked to a “potential direct threat to the UK,” but that they did not know what the threat consisted of, when it was planned for, or its supposed targets.

Even more revealing, during the Labour Party conference, 600 people were stopped and questioned under existing anti-terror legislation. No one was charged with any offence, and there was no reason cited by police to suspect them of being connected to terrorism. Instead, people were detained and their names kept on file for such things as wearing anti-Blair or anti-Iraq war T-shirts. Under the new legislation, this could result in imprisonment.

Just as important as its impact on individual freedom of speech is the terror bill’s implications for freedom of the press, without which the possibility of developing an informed opinion, let alone a political movement in opposition to the government, is severely

curtailed.

The legislation covers the dissemination of views by any medium. These views do not have to “glorify” terrorism, or even be intended to do so. It will be enough to argue that they have contributed to encouraging others to commit terror offences.

On this basis, it would be entirely possible for the government to make a case that anti-war reporting in a newspaper or on the Internet—including by the *World Socialist Web Site*—justifies and therefore gives succour to the Iraqi resistance. Even explicit opposition to terrorism would not constitute an unarguable defence against such a legally spurious charge.

The proposals on detention of terrorist suspects are in breach of the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights, which requires that a detained person be “brought promptly before a judge or other officer authorised by law to exercise judicial power.” More fundamental still, they contravene the essential provisions of British law, enshrined in the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679, which in turn ultimately rests upon the Magna Carta of 1215 that declared, “No freemen shall be taken or imprisoned...except by the lawful judgement of his peers or by the law of the land.”

Blair has rubbished these constitutionally enshrined freedoms as outdated, complaining in his speech to the Labour Party conference, “The whole of our system starts from the proposition that its duty is to protect the innocent from being wrongly convicted.... But surely our primary duty should be to allow law-abiding people to live in safety. It means a complete change of thinking.”

This “change of thinking” is not confined to the treatment of terror suspects. On the day the legislation was proposed, Blair declared that in future the police would be empowered to impose on-the-spot fines for anti-social behaviour, and that a trial would only take place if the alleged perpetrator demanded one.

Announcing the measures, Blair said that he had told police chiefs as regards their powers, “you tell me what you need...and I will deliver it for you.”

Like some latter-day absolute monarch, the prime minister declared that he sat in “the decision-making seat” concerning the laws of the land, and that he had determined it was no longer possible to abide by “the rules of the game we have at the moment.”

These rules are “too complicated, too laborious,” he continued, and meant that “the police end up being completely hide-bound by a whole series of restrictions and difficulties” including having to take an accused person “all the way through a long court process,” where they were represented by “defence lawyers and all the rest of it.”

This is the language of dictatorship.

Blair is setting out to establish a new legal principle—guilty on the say-so of the police—and a political and social order in which the government has the power to dictate what can and cannot be said. This has been accompanied by threats leveled against the judiciary not to stand in the government's way.

So sweeping are the powers contained in the draft anti-terror bill that it has provoked widespread criticism from civil rights groups, opposition parties and sections of the judiciary, including former law lords.

They have denounced the bill as an attack on civil liberties and the product of an “arrogant” and “authoritarian” prime minister driven by political expediency. Many commentators have pointed out that the bill's proposals can not be justified by the actual terror threat, and will in fact have a negative impact on national security and social cohesion by alienating and criminalising broad sections of the Muslim population in particular.

These concerns and observations are entirely legitimate. But what accounts for such a mixture of apparent panic and grandstanding on the part of the government?

Proposals that have such a fundamental impact on legal and democratic rights cannot be explained away as merely the product of an illiberal and arrogant prime minister. Only by understanding the broader impulses for this turn to authoritarian forms of rule can the attack on essential freedoms be opposed and defeated.

If Blair behaves as a man under siege, then it is with good reason. His government functions as the representative of a fabulously wealthy corporate elite, whose interests are antithetical to those of working people in Britain and internationally.

Experience testifies to the impossibility of securing a democratic mandate for the government's policies. Rather, it has suffered a continuous erosion of popular support, leaving it isolated and dependent upon the suppression of growing political and social dissent.

This found supreme expression in the launching of a war of aggression against Iraq. Commissioned on the basis of lies and in defiance of public opinion, the war had nothing to do with establishing democracy in Iraq, but was motivated by the desire to establish US and British hegemony over a region of strategic geo-political significance.

Even now, rather than countenance a withdrawal from Iraq, the government has kept British troops there in pitched battles against a popular insurgency that is growing by the day, whilst making increasingly bellicose threats against neighbouring Iran.

The policy of militarism and colonial conquest abroad is inextricably linked to one of social and economic plunder at home. If in the past British imperialism was able to use the fruits of empire to secure social peace at home, this is no longer possible today.

Eight years after taking power, a government beginning its third term in office has presided over a widening of the gap between rich and poor beyond that existing after 18 years of Conservative rule. It has made clear its intention to significantly expand over the next period the inroads made by private capital into all areas of the public sector, including health and education.

The government's aim is epitomised by Blair's declaration that

Britain must be able to compete with China and India—countries with “labour costs a fraction of ours.” It is this agenda that lies behind the resort to ever more repressive legislation.

No confidence should be placed in any of the official parties, or in the judiciary, to defend democratic rights.

A cross-party coalition has been formed to oppose the terror bill, “Uniting Communities.” Led by Labour's London Mayor Ken Livingstone, it encompasses a handful of Labour MPs, the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Respect, the Green Party, Liberty, some lawyers, trade union leaders and religious groups.

But its differences with the government centre on the complaint that “in its present form the legislation will not command the cross party and cross community consensus which is essential for it to be successful.” The coalition only asks for amendments to the bill, on the plans for 90 days' detention without trial and on its wording, as a basis for maintaining support for the fight against terror.

It is not possible, however, to support the Blair government's “war on terror” as if this were somehow divorced from its criminal actions in Iraq, which are directly responsible for any increased terror threat.

Moreover, such appeals for national unity and all-party consensus only serve to politically disarm working people as to the more fundamental danger posed to their civil liberties and their livelihoods emanating from the government and the police.

What is required is the development of a mass political movement that links the defence of democratic rights to the demand for the immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq and for the prosecution of Blair and President George W. Bush as war criminals.

This must be conceived of as an essential part of a broader offensive against the profit system that is the source of militarism, war and social inequality, through the building of a new socialist party of the working class.



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