

# Britain: police given unprecedented arrest and surveillance powers

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Britain's Labour government has given police unprecedented powers of arrest for any criminal offence whatsoever, even minor misdemeanours. Civil rights groups have denounced the new law as akin to a police-state measure.

The elimination of the distinction between "arrestable" and "non-arrestable" offences is part of the Serious and Organised Crime Act of 2005 and came into effect January 1.

Previously police only had the power to arrest those suspected of committing an offence carrying a sentence of at least five years in prison. Now, police are able to hold anyone they suspect of any offence, even something as minor as littering—giving them the power to harass and intimidate virtually at will. Officers will merely have to satisfy themselves of "a person's involvement or suspected involvement or attempted involvement in the commission of a criminal offence," and that there are "reasonable grounds for believing that the person's arrest is necessary."

Additionally, police are now allowed to photograph suspects on the street where they have been arrested or issued with a fixed penalty notice, rather than taking them back to a police station. This can be used to build up a digital photographic database using the simple expediency of charging someone with a minor violation, or even giving them a fixed penalty notice. The photo can be kept on file even if the person is found not guilty in court. DNA samples and fingerprints can also be kept.

Last year, the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act was used to mount a major attack on freedom of speech, when Maya Evans was convicted for having staged an unauthorised antiwar protest near the Cenotaph war memorial—reading out the names of British soldiers who died in Iraq. The law was

described by the *Telegraph* newspaper as "the biggest expansion in decades of police powers to deprive people of their liberty."

Opposing the new powers of arrest, Shami Chakrabarti of Liberty said they represented "a fundamental shift" in power from the public to the police and the state. "We don't need to give the police carte blanche to go around throwing people in cells for things like dropping litter," she said. "Anyone who gives a bit of backchat now risks being hauled off to a police station. Given the history of powers such as stop and search, there will also be the perception among ethnic minorities that they are being targeted."

As an example of the police abusing their sweeping powers of arrest, Chakrabarti recalled the ejection from last year's Labour conference of 82-year-old Walter Wolfgang and his detention under the Terrorism Act. But this is only the most notorious example. In fact, more than 600 people were stopped and questioned under anti-terror legislation during the Labour Party conference. None were charged with any offence, but some were detained for merely wearing anti-Iraq-war T-shirts.

More than 10,000 people were stopped and searched by the Metropolitan Police in just two months following the July 7 terror bombs in London, with no one being arrested or charged for offences related to terrorism, the *Guardian* has reported. The figure reflect a five-fold increase for white people and a twelve-fold increase for Asian and black people.

Other new powers contained in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act include allowing the police to apply for "multi-premises" and "all-premises" warrants, repeated entry warrants and for extending the lifetime of warrants from one month to three months.

The sweeping character of the new law again gives

the lie to the claim that the ongoing assault on fundamental civil liberties is made necessary by the threat of terrorism. Rather the “fight against terrorism” is one plank of a campaign to instil fear into the population in order to encourage acceptance of ever more draconian powers for the state.

The other plank is provided by claims that crime is out of control and cannot be fought by using what Prime Minister Tony Blair decried as “Dickensian” legislation. Home Office Minister Hazel Blears used the same type of rhetoric in her attempt to justify the new powers of arrest, insisting that they were necessary to create “a modern, efficient police service equipping frontline officers with the tools they need to fight modern crime effectively.”

Whatever excuse is given, the real targets of the repressive measures are the millions of working people who are suffering as a result of the pro-big business agenda of the government and are therefore seen as a growing social and political threat to the ruling elite.

In the run-up to Christmas, the *Independent* newspaper drew attention to another grave threat to civil liberties that highlights this fact.

Science editor Steve Connor wrote on December 22 that Britain is to become the first country in which the movements of all vehicles are recorded. By March, a new national surveillance system will be set up using a network of thousands of CCTV cameras that will be equipped to automatically read every passing number plate. Records of all 35 million number-plated vehicles travelling on all main roads and motorways will then be held for years on a central database installed alongside the Police National Computer in Hendon, north London.

Connor writes that the scheme, which has never been subject to parliamentary approval, is being “orchestrated by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and has the full backing of ministers who have sanctioned the spending of £24m this year on equipment.”

More than 50 local authorities have signed agreements allowing the police to convert existing traffic cameras to the new system and agreements are also being brokered with the Highways Agency, supermarkets and petrol station owners. MI5 will also be able to access

the data.

British workers suffer the heaviest levels of electronic surveillance in the world. Britain accounts for one fifth of the world’s CCTV cameras, with well over 4 million in operation—one for every 14 people. City residents can expect to be captured on CCTV up to 300 times a day.



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