

Britain: Blair denounces liberal critics for opposing attacks on democratic rights

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has utilised an email exchange with journalist Henry Porter to attack critics of his government's assault on civil liberties and to promise yet more draconian law-and-order measures. The emails were published in the *Observer* on April 23.

The Blair government has undermined the presumption of innocence and the right to trial by jury and, under the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act that came into effect in January, has given the police extraordinary powers to arrest and impose punishment on actions never before considered criminal.

Under the guise of the war against terror, police have been given extraordinary powers to shoot to kill, whilst anti-terror legislation enables a cabinet minister to declare a state of emergency and suspend parliament. The provisions of the innocuous-sounding Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill will set precedents allowing the government of the day to routinely bypass parliamentary supervision.

These measures have raised concern amongst some journalists and members of the judiciary who fear that the government is undermining the rule of law and bringing the entire basis of democratic rule into disrepute.

In the last months, Porter has written a number of articles denouncing Blair for allowing the abuses in Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and the UK's Belmarsh prison, for the introduction of ID cards and for moving Britain "ever closer to becoming a totalitarian state."

He also supported the remarks by Lord Steyn, chair of the civil rights group Justice, where the former law lord asked "whether foreign governments have used 9/11 as cover to justify their crackdown on human rights."

Using the experiences of Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa and Chile, Steyn warned of the dangers of an elected dictatorship, stating that "History has shown that majority rule and strict adherence to legality is no guarantee against tyranny."

A striking feature of Blair's email correspondence with Porter was how the prime minister's previous justifications for repressive legislation as necessary to combat the terrorist threat were peripheral. Blair declared that "terrorism requires a separate debate" and that he would focus instead on the importance of extraordinary measures to counter anti-social behaviour.

Steyn's arguments "shows how far out of touch much of the political and legal establishment" is with people's lives, he wrote. The reality of the twenty-first century was one of "shifting

communities, dysfunctional families, globalisation and myriad influences, not all benign, to which our young people are subject."

The social problems that these had wrought justified a complete overhaul of policing and the legal system: "If the traditional processes were the answer to these crime and law and order problems that are an age away from Dixon of Dock Green and the stable communities of 50 years ago, then we wouldn't be having this debate. But they're not. They've failed."

It was a question of safeguarding the needs of "law abiding people" against "gangs of youth," "vandals," people "who play their music loud until 2am; who vilify anyone who asks them to stop," indeed anyone who did not "treat others with courtesy and good manners."

Blair concluded with an appeal to those who "mourn the loss of respect: if, in order to get it back, we have to alter our traditional way of thinking and doing, then people, and I mean wholly reasonable, moderate people, will make a very conscious decision to do just that."

Blair's attempts to counter allegations that his government is undemocratic and authoritarian achieved the opposite effect. In what amounted to a blueprint for dictatorship, he argued that democratic rights can no longer be viewed as universal and inalienable. The government must have the right to withdraw them whenever it sees fit.

His claim that combating what are essentially petty misdemeanours necessitates such a fundamental break with democratic and legal norms appears absurd. However, his reference to the impact of globalisation on the younger generation does hint at the vast social alienation and dislocation that has developed in Britain, which is the real driving force for the ongoing offensive against civil liberties.

Blair heads a government that acts on behalf of a financial oligarchy that seeks to enrich itself through predatory wars to seize control of the world's major resources, combined with a massive redistribution of wealth away from working people.

The polarisation of society, between a wealthy elite at one end and broad layers of the working population facing worsening economic insecurity at the other, has undermined any possibility of maintaining social consensus.

At the same time, many people have come to view government and the official political structures as corrupt representatives of big business, indifferent to their own basic interests. If Blair complains of a loss of "respect," he has good cause. What respect can there

be for a government that tramples over international law to wage war against a defenceless country, in defiance of public opinion and on the basis of monumental lies? And that has raised the naked self-enrichment of a privileged few, regardless of the social consequences, to an unquestionable principle?

Blair cannot even begin to address the criticism of Steyn and others on the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. Nor can he make any accounting for the impact of his government's policies in fostering the social inequalities that are the breeding ground for crime.

His only answer to growing social and political discontent is further repressive measures in order to ensure that the dictates of big business are met. Tellingly, Blair defended the legislative framework bill on the grounds that changing economic regulations through parliamentary acts is "a real problem for business. It costs money and causes hassle."

Immediately following the publications of Blair's emails, Home Secretary Charles Clarke took up the same theme. He posted a reply on the Home Office web site to Simon Carr of the *Independent*, Britain's other major liberal newspaper, who has also attacked the government's record on democratic rights.

Clarke then summoned around a dozen journalists to a meeting in his office where he berated Porter, Carr and the *Guardian's* Jenni Russell, for 30 minutes. Later that day, he gave a speech to the London School of Economics. He claimed that a "dangerous poison" was slipping into the media because of "incorrect, tendentious and over-simplified" statements about the government's record on civil liberties and called for increased powers to regulate the media.

Such exchanges testify to the extreme nervousness within the government over any criticism of its actions. It has relied on newspapers such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent* to provide a pseudo-progressive apologia for its right-wing economic and social nostrums and its colonialist ambitions in the Middle East.

Blair and Clarke's exchanges coincide with the campaign for the May 4 local authority elections in the run-up to which Labour has insisted that there can be no retreat on "reform" of the state-run National Health Service, the privatisation of education and a raft of other deeply unpopular measures.

Most importantly, Britain is once again functioning as Washington's foremost ally in preparing for war, this time against Iran. By publicly chastising Porter, Steyn, Carr and others, the government intended to warn anyone wavering within the nominally liberal establishment that there must be no retreat.

Blair has every reason to believe that this warning will not go unheeded. Those journalists who are critical of the government are in a small minority, whilst their newspapers editorial line is generally firmly supportive of the government.

Notwithstanding differences over the Iraq war, they are unanimous in critically endorsing Labour's domestic agenda, articulating as they do the outlook of the upper echelons of the middle class that has benefited from tax cuts and stock market and property speculation. Blair's focus on the anti-social behaviour of the poorest within society was calculated to have a visceral appeal to the prejudices and material interests of this layer.

Sure enough, the *Observer* did not disappoint the prime minister.

Its editorial described Blair's "willingness to engage in this argument [as] in itself a profoundly democratic act."

Agreeing with the terms of the supposed debate set down by Blair, it proclaimed that "there can be few more important ideas than the battle between individual liberties and the collective good, central to so many modern dilemmas from combating terrorism to dealing with anti-social behaviour."

It continued, "Readers will make up their own minds about the rights and wrongs of Tony Blair's contention that respecting the civil liberties of one may trample on the rights of another."

For its part, the *Independent* left it to the individual journalists and various civil rights groups to respond to Blair's and Clarke's diatribes.

However, this readiness to kowtow before Blair undermines the ability of the media to effectively propagandise on the government's behalf.

There was an almost universally hostile response to the *Observer's* editorial amongst numerous comments posted on the newspaper's website.

One reader described the paper as "a mouthpiece for the establishment.... [T]he *Observer/Guardian* and PM (war criminal) Blair are all cut from the very same cloth and, broadly speaking, have the same interests." One wrote, "Thanks for reminding me why I stopped buying the *Guardian* and the *Observer*, namely their obsequious editorial relationships with this vile, profoundly undemocratic government." Another stated, "What an utter disgrace. Thatcher would never have dared to suggest such a move in her darkest foaming-mouth moments. God help us," while another quipped, "Perhaps you would like to rename this 'Leader' column the 'Our Glorious Leader' column?"

The clash between the editorial line of the *Observer* and the views of much of its own readership underscores the gulf that separates the entire establishment from the concerns of broad layers of the population. It confirms the essential role played by the *World Socialist Web Site* in developing a socialist movement in defence of democratic rights and in opposition to militarism and war through raising the political awareness and critical faculties of working people.



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