

European Union ministers use terror scare to justify more anti-democratic measures

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On Wednesday, the interior ministers of Britain, Germany, France, Finland and Portugal held an impromptu meeting in London with the European Union's justice commissioner and its counter-terrorism coordinator.

The informal talks were billed as an urgent response to the August 10 alleged terror plot that had caused panic and chaos across UK airports and disrupted flights internationally.

In reality, the terror scare merely provided a political pretext for Europe's leaders to legitimise draconian measures that have been in preparation for more than a year.

Britain's Home Secretary John Reid set the tone. In one of three photo-ops organised around the talks in the space of two hours, Reid warned, "As we face the threat of mass murder, we have to accept that the rights of the individual that we enjoy must and will be balanced with the collective right of security and the protection of life and limb."

Even from a procedural standpoint, the convening of an international meeting to discuss sweeping proposals of dubious constitutional validity based on unproven allegations indicates a cynical disregard for democratic rights.

After more than a week, no evidence has been presented to back up police and government claims that they successfully thwarted another 9/11 aimed at causing "mass murder on an unimaginable scale." No bombs have been found, and it transpires that none of those arrested for involvement in the alleged plot had purchased air tickets and some do not even have passports.

Amidst growing public scepticism, the extensive police investigation appears more to do with constructing a case after the fact. On the same day that the EU ministers met, a judge granted police extra time to continue questioning the 24 people detained in early morning raids. None of those arrested were allowed to make representations at the closed hearing, and all were informed of their continued detention via video link. Under draconian laws introduced by the Blair government, they can be held for a month without charge.

Still, Reid told a press conference, "It's very important that the measures that are taken in one country are reflected in other countries because we want equal security for all our countries."

The proponents of terror "would abuse our open societies, would misuse our freedoms and adapt the latest technology to their evil intent and have no regard for human life or for human rights," he continued.

Based on such claims, the six ministers agreed to present plans to

an EU meeting in September that will effectively seal off Europe and overturn fundamental civil liberties, including the right to free speech.

The proposals—many of which were drafted by Britain during its presidency of the EU in 2005—include expanding data-sharing on airline passengers, with "advanced passenger information" to be sent ahead to destinations throughout the EU. This will eventually include details of travellers' biometric identifiers, such as fingerprints or iris scans.

Only in May, the European Court of Justice had thrown out a deal agreed to between the EU and Washington whereby European airlines hand over information on passengers travelling to the US before take-off. The Luxembourg court had ruled that this constituted an invasion of privacy and had no legal basis under European law.

The ruling caused a transatlantic row with Peter King, US Republican chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, complaining "Sometimes I think European parliamentarians don't realise the reality of governing."

The court had given policy makers until the end of September to resolve the conflict. In an interview on August 13, Michael Chertoff, head of US Homeland Security, said he hoped the terror scare would now end all objections to US demands. "I sure hope this is a great wake-up call," he said.

Not only is Washington to get everything it demanded, but the ministers also proposed that a "full exchange" of passenger information, including "unfiltered" information, be established between Europe's police forces.

"Our ideas are to extend to the European territory, to all flights into, through, from the territory of one or more member states and perhaps including the intra-EU flights," Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini said.

"We could explore positive profiling for passengers allowing to be checked well in advance in order to make quicker and easier the controls on board," he added.

According to reports, the Blair government is currently considering the introduction of a "trusted traveller" scheme that would allow 40,000 passengers to fast-track through security checks at airports. More stringent checks would be imposed on those travelling from "high-risk" countries.

This has been coupled with demands for greater passenger profiling explicitly targeting those from a certain ethnic or religious background explicit—a proposal one of Britain's most

senior Muslim police officers described as tantamount to creating a new offence of “travelling whilst Asian.”

Indeed, on August 10, Azar Iqbal, a British citizen travelling to Disneyland with his wife and three children, was thrown out of the US after he was reportedly told by Atlanta immigration officers that Asian people needed a special visa to enter America.

Azar says that he was questioned for four hours in front of his family, who were forced to go ahead without him. Before being put on the next flight back to the UK, he says immigration officers also quizzed him as to whether he had any connection with those that had been arrested in Britain early that morning.

EU ministers now look set to agree on Washington’s demands for a “no-fly” list, whereby passengers’ names will be vetted before take-off and any that appear on a security list will not be allowed to fly. Airlines had been resisting the move for fear of costly delays, but it was imposed as a “temporary” measure in the UK following the terror scare and is now expected to be made permanent.

The EU ministers are also to seek greater powers for policing the Internet, including banning web sites considered to be fomenting terrorism.

Measures to clamp down on the Internet have been in fruition for some time. For more than a year, the Council of the European Union has been discussing how to shut down web sites that “incite” or “glorify” terrorism but had difficulties in defining what constituted “terrorism.”

The six EU heads were similarly vague on the question. But according to reports, they intend to make the Internet a “hostile environment” for terrorists by banning web sites that “spread messages of hate, glorify murder and give practical advice on making bombs.”

The meeting also agreed to take measures to create a “European Islam,” whereby EU governments would “train imams” (Muslim religious leaders). Frattini said this was “very important not only to show to the Muslim communities that we fully respect other religions, other faiths, but we also want them to respect national laws, European laws and fundamental rights, and first of all right to live.”

Such remarks are clearly aimed at branding all Muslims as potential terrorists by virtue of their faith.

This slander was echoed by Reid, who claimed that two fundamentally different sets of values are in play in Europe. One is the values of the European Union, he said. They include “democracy, freedom and justice to all.” The second is the values of “totalitarianism,” which aims to “subvert a religion whose very name stands for peace,” he said, referring to Islam.

In reality, it is Europe’s political leaders that constitute the greatest threat to democracy and freedom, as has been all too bloodily illustrated in Iraq and in Lebanon—where they were complicit in enabling Israel’s brutal offensive—not to speak of the measures implemented against asylum seekers and civil liberties in general.

This is further underscored by the political biographies of those who gathered in London.

Frattini, for example, was Italy’s foreign minister from 2002 to 2004—a time when Silvio Berlusconi’s government was playing a

crucial role in lending international credibility to Washington’s aggression against Iraq. A member of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, Frattini defended the US-led invasion, claiming that George Bush “is the president of a state that has and is bringing freedom to the world.”

Nicolas Sarkozy is a leading member of France’s right-wing Union for a Popular Movement. In his bid to replace President Jacques Chirac, Sarkozy has made an open pitch to supporters of the fascist National Front with his authoritarian law-and-order policies and anti-immigrant legislation. It was Sarkozy who imposed November’s state of emergency to crush the suburban youth revolt on France’s impoverished council estates and who drafted the Internal Security Law dramatically strengthening police powers, which became law in January.

Wolfgang Schäuble, of the Christian Democratic Union, has been described as “one of the most rigid neoconservative politicians in Germany”—no mean feat, given the Merkel government’s assault on social provision and civil liberties. He had proposed the deployment of armed forces during this year’s World Cup, and is currently leading plans to amend the German constitution to enable security forces to shoot down hijacked planes.

As for Reid, even before he became home secretary last year, a political profile by Kevin Toolis in the *Guardian*, in 2002, described him as, “more of a functionary than a potential leader; an apparatchik. If we had a Politburo instead of a cabinet, Reid would probably be running the State Security Division.”

The analogy is more politically germane that one would first imagine. A member of the Stalinist Communist Party during his university days—Reid reportedly said he joined it because it was one of the few non-Trotskyist groups on campus besides the chess club—he soon moved into the Labour Party, leading the witch-hunts against socialists and lefts in its ranks during the 1980s.

A loyal Blairite who is tipped to take over from the prime minister when he finally steps down, he has been crucial in enforcing the government’s big business policies in his various positions as head of transport, health, defence and now the home office. One of the home office’s latest plans is to forcibly return children whose applications for asylum have been rejected to such war-torn countries as Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Such is the reactionary record of those presuming to lecture others on “democracy” and “justice.”



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