

Britain: New terror warnings issued to justify policies of war and repression

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The overwhelming popular opposition to the Iraq war manifested in the US elections and the resulting weakening of the Bush administration have raised concerns in Britain's ruling circles. There is fear that the anti-war and anti-Bush vote in America might become a catalyst for popular opposition in Britain to the crisis-ridden Blair government and its policies of war abroad and attacks on working class living standards and democratic rights at home.

This is the background against which Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, director-general of MI5, the British domestic intelligence service, last week issued an apocalyptic warning, without presenting any substantiation, of imminent terrorist attacks. Her remarks were designed to whip up fear and legitimise the "war on terror."

The security services, she claimed, will be unable to stop an attack because, despite increased funding and manpower, they are overwhelmed by the vast scale of the problem. She said there were now 30 "Priority 1" ongoing "mass casualty" terror plots in Britain. The Security Service had identified 200 terrorist networks involving at least 1,600 people, and MI5's caseload had risen by 80 percent since January.

"More and more people are moving from passive sympathy towards active terrorism through being radicalised or indoctrinated by friends, families, in organised training events here and overseas," she declared. "Young teenagers are being groomed to be suicide bombers."

She continued, "Today we see the use of home-made explosive devices. Tomorrow's threat may, and I suggest will, include the use of chemical, bacteriological agents, radioactive materials and even nuclear technology."

Opinion polls show that "over 100,000 of our citizens consider that the July bomb attacks in London were justified," she added.

Manningham-Buller's warning dominated the headlines for several days. She had the prime slot on the BBC's *Today* programme, which sets the news agenda for the day. Her words were voiced by an actor because the speech had been given to a selected audience and no cameras or recording had been allowed. She herself was not available for interview.

The speech did more than merely add to the atmosphere of Islamophobia which British politicians have been stoking up in recent months. Warnings of a horrific attack that is both imminent and inevitable raise the distinct possibility that a major provocation is being considered by Britain's secret police. And even if such a crime does not materialise, the speech portends a renewed offensive on the civil liberties of the British people.

To this end, Manningham-Buller's speech was given the go-ahead by Home Secretary John Reid, and her claims were immediately backed up by Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that her remarks contradicted the government's insistence that terror bombings have no connection with the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Manningham-Buller made clear that Blair's foreign policy was indeed contributing to "terrorist" opposition in Britain.

There is a belief amongst significant sections of the ruling elite, expressed recently by Britain's chief of the general staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, that Blair's government is mired in disaster in Iraq, and is fighting a losing war in Afghanistan.

The Democrats' gains in the mid-term elections will deepen the conviction of some that Britain must distance itself from Bush and attempt to develop a new approach to asserting its interests in the Middle East and Central Asia. However, Britain's ability to do so is severely limited, given the strategic importance of its alliance with the US.

In any event, no section of the ruling class is ready to contemplate an end to the war in Iraq or any retreat from militarism. Manningham-Buller's speech came a day after assurances by Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett that there will be no "precipitate" moves to withdraw British troops from Iraq or Afghanistan.

Despite the overwhelming rejection by the American people of Bush's invasion of Iraq, and despite widespread opposition in Britain, the UK government is making clear that imperialist military operations will continue under the guise of the fight against terror.

Britain, Blair said, faced a "long and deep struggle" against terrorism, and it was important to "stand up and be counted" and to tackle the "poisonous propaganda" that warped young people's minds.

Manningham-Buller speaks for the British political elite even more certainly than does Blair. She was bred for her present job. Her father was Sir Reginald Manningham-Buller, a minister in Winston Churchill's government before becoming attorney general and then lord chancellor during the Macmillan era.

Her record is one of total reliability where the interests of the British state are concerned. She became one of the few MI5 agents in the Cold War period trusted with the information that Oleg Gordievsky was a double agent, and she was involved in analysing the material he supplied. She was posted in Washington during the first Gulf War, returning in 1992 to head anti-IRA operations and becoming deputy director-general of MI5 in 1997 under the Blair Labour government.

In 2003, she submitted a statement to the Law Lords praising the uncovering of the "ricin terror plot." Police claimed they had found an Al Qaeda cell and what was described as a "poisons laboratory" in a London flat where a terrorist attack was being prepared. The case against eight men subsequently collapsed in April 2006. No ricin or poisons were found. The one man who was imprisoned was convicted for killing a policeman during the raid, not for terrorist offences.

The case was based on allegations made by one Mohammad Meguerba to the authorities in Algeria. His statements were widely believed to have been obtained under torture.

Manningham-Buller justified the use of the evidence, saying that "questioning of Algerian liaison about their methods of questioning detainees would almost certainly have been rebuffed and at the same time would have damaged the relationship to the detriment of our ability to counter international terrorism."

This case was used to justify and push through anti-terror legislation, including provisions allowing the detention without charge or trial of foreign nationals. For three years a group of men were detained virtually in complete isolation. Many of them suffered mental illness as a result.

When this practice was over-ruled by the Law Lords in 2005, the government passed new legislation that enabled them to issue “control orders”—a form of house arrest in which free speech is severely curtailed.

In 2005, the July 7 London bombings, in which 52 people died, raised more questions about the way in which the threat of terrorism is being used to justify government policies. At least two of those involved in the London bombings were known to the intelligence agencies before the event. They had been under surveillance for two years. What is more, security in the capital had actually been downgraded despite the fact that the G8 summit was taking place in Britain at the time.

Many unanswered questions remain about the London bombings. Survivors and relatives of the dead have called for a public inquiry, but the government has rejected all such calls.

Some of the issues involved have been raised by the writer and academic Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, who teaches international relations at the University of Sussex, Brighton. In his book *The London Bombings*, he concludes that “the state’s version of events systematically suppresses evidence that the bombings are linked to the activities of Islamic groups long tolerated in this country.” He points out that “those who inspired, recruited and trained the bombers themselves have a troubling identity as provisional allies of the British state.”

Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed describes how, “In all these areas [Afghanistan and the Balkans] militant Islamic networks have operated in collaboration with the military and intelligence institutions of Britain, the US and European countries,” and are linked to Western attempts to “secure a variety of regional strategic and economic interests, largely related to energy concerns.”

As the Socialist Equality Party pointed out in an assessment made one year after the bombings, “Given the record of MI5 and its external security counterpart MI6, and the central role provocations have historically played in Britain’s policy in Ireland and elsewhere, it cannot be excluded that the London bombings were allowed to take place.”

In April this year the Terrorism Act, pushed through in the wake of the London bombings, came onto the statute books. Organisations and individuals who “encourage” terrorism, including those who merely make statements that “glorify” terrorist acts, are criminalized—even when there is no intention to carry out a criminal act of any kind. It is now possible to hold people for 28 days without charge. Further repressive anti-terror legislation is being planned for the next session of Parliament.

This summer, UK airports were brought to a halt by a terror scare. Twenty four people were arrested and face trial. Some of the accused had no passports and none had bought tickets for the transatlantic flights they were supposedly targeting to be exploded in mid-air.

It is claimed that they intended to mix “liquid explosives” on board aeroplanes. Retired British Army intelligence officer Nigel Wylde, who was decorated for his work in bomb-disposal in Northern Ireland, has described the suggestion that terrorists could mix explosives on board a plane as “fiction.” Lt-Colonel Wylde, who retired in 1991, testified before the Barron Inquiry into the Dublin-Monaghan bombings that was held in the Republic of Ireland in 2004.

On top of the liquid bomb plot arrests, a further eight men were arrested two years ago. One of these, Dhiren Barot, was on trial last week and the others face trial next year. Reports of Barot’s trial raise more questions than answers.

He is said to be a “significant Al Qaeda operative” and is accused of planning large-scale terrorist attacks. The charges include the allegation that he planned to set off a dirty bomb full of radioactive material, and to bomb an underground train in London, flooding the tunnels beneath the

River Thames. Barot changed his plea from not guilty to an admission of conspiracy to murder in the last month. The police claimed he did so because the evidence against him was “overwhelming.”

In fact, the evidence against him is circumstantial. Plans detailing the attacks are said to have been discovered on a laptop. But the computer was seized during a raid in Pakistan. This is hardly a reliable source of evidence.

No weapons or bombs were found. No radioactive material, biological agents or chemical substances were discovered. Barot had been in prison for two years by the time he came to trial. How much psychological pressure was brought to bear on him to plead guilty is unknown. He was sentenced to a minimum of 40 years imprisonment.

One recent event demonstrates the type of operation being used by MI5 to whip up fear of terrorist plots. Home Secretary John Reid recently made a speech attacking “Muslim bullies,” during which he was heckled by Abu Izzadeen and Anjem Choudray. Both are affiliated to the proscribed al-Muhajiroun network, which is allegedly linked to Al Qaeda.

As the author Nafeez Mossadeq Ahmed has pointed out, “Despite apparent proscription, the group’s key members and activities operate intact, quite unhindered. To date, the government refuses to arrest and prosecute these individuals in spite of their repeated violations of British law, including incitement to violence, racial hatred and terrorism, and in particular despite their open admission of engaging in terrorist-training with confessed intent to target Britain.”

George Galloway, Respect Member of Parliament for Bethnal Green and Bow, raised the issue in an open letter to John Reid. He wrote, “The man who harangued you—Abu Izzadine [sic]—is a well-known and violent extremist from an organisation your own government has proscribed. Yet he was allowed within punching distance of the British Home Secretary. How? Why?”

Galloway continued, “This is the same man who led a group of fanatic thugs in the brief ‘hostage-taking’ of myself and my daughter and several innocent members of the public during a general election meeting last year. This is well known to the Special Branch and senior police officers in East London—the very people in charge of your security today.”

The incident involving Reid falls into a pattern of provocations that have been used to justify repressive measures. Throughout the summer, lurid claims have been made about terrorist plots. The tiny number of Muslim women who wear the veil have been held up as a major threat to the British way of life. An atmosphere of hysteria has been created in which racist attacks on Muslims have increased. Now, the director general of MI5 has stepped out the shadows to warn of an imminent threat which she is supposedly powerless to prevent.

It cannot be doubted that Blair’s warmongering and anti-Muslim agitation have angered millions throughout the world and created a fertile recruiting ground for Islamic fundamentalists. What can legitimately be asked is what role the MI5 and other agencies of the British government will have played in any terrorist attack that may occur.



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