Britain: Brown seeks support for further attack on civil liberties

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Against the background of the terror scare resulting from the failed car bombings in London and Glasgow, Britain's media has been filled with praise for the newly formed government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Brown has been hailed for his level-headed, low-key and businesslike response, with his performance contrasted with the grandstanding that would have been expected from his predecessor, Tony Blair.

There is no doubt that Brown has indeed drawn certain political conclusions from the crisis that gripped the Blair government, in which he functioned as chancellor.

After the lies used to justify the Iraq war, the constant invoking of the terrorist threat to justify repressive legislation and the undermining of civil liberties, and Blair's readiness to bypass parliament, ignore the advice of the civil service and denounce the objections of the judiciary—all carried out by a government that has served the interests of big business at the expense of the vast majority—Brown came to office bereft of any genuine popular support.

Within days, he was plunged into a major security crisis that once again served to remind people of the bitter legacy of Blair's decision to go to war in Iraq. Little wonder that Brown instructed his governmental team, including new Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, to play things low-key.

Yet Brown's last days as chancellor saw him lend his backing to proposed new anti-terror legislation. This included extending the time police can hold someone under anti-terror laws from 28 to possibly 90 days, lengthening sentences in terrorism-related cases, allowing passports to be seized and enabling police to question suspects even after they have been charged. The proposed bill also raised the possibility of using secret intercepts and telephone taps in court.

Brown may have changed his public posture somewhat, but not the substance of any of these policies. His only concession to public unease and opposition to further draconian legislation was to state that this was "not an issue for today".

Given that discussion on the legislation had already been scheduled for later in the year and the actual bill had not even been presented, this was hardly surprising. To move additional legislation just days after a terror incident was in fact neither possible nor necessary given the extensive powers the government has already placed on the statute books.

Home Secretary Jacqui Smith has confirmed the government will introduce the planned anti-terror laws before the end of this year, after a consultation period with everyone of "good will". Brown is having discussions with Conservative party leader David Cameron to secure agreement on the proposed measures and the Tories have indicated they will back a 90-day detention period, as well as possibly supporting the use of phone tap evidence and allowing police to question suspects after they have been charged.

Even without such proposals being advanced, Brown's public pronouncements were of grave concern for anyone concerned with civil liberties.

On BBC1's "Sunday AM" programme, Brown warned the British public to get used to the idea that "security measures have to be increased" for a long time to come. "We are dealing with a long-term threat. It is not going to go away in the next few weeks or months," he said. People must accept the consequences, whether "it's checks as people go into the airports or whether it's also more police patrols, or whether it may be barriers people have to come through... We have got to take measures in crowded places and you will see a greater police presence and you will see in some cases further measures to enhance security there. And people may expect checks of cars."

Brown also rejected any attempt to link the terror threat with Britain's foreign policy. "Of course we want greater peace and security in Iraq and Afghanistan," he stated, adding, "Anybody I talk to, a leader in any part of the world knows we're dealing with a long-term threat unrelated in detail to one specific point of conflict in the world".

He then called for an ideological battle against Islamic fundamentalism, "similar to what happened during the Cold War in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, when we had to mount a propaganda effort to explain to people that our values represented the best of commitments to individual dignity, to liberty and to human life being taken seriously."

The words could have been lifted from any speech by Blair since 9/11.

On Tuesday, Brown addressed parliament detailing his 12-point plan for constitutional change. This included announcing his intention to set up a new national security council, "charged with bringing together our overseas defence and security, but also our development and community relations efforts, to send out a clear message that at all times we will be vigilant and we will never yield in addressing the terrorist threat."

The nature of the proposed body, like the rest of Brown's

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agenda, remains vague. At the very least, however, it indicates the degree to which the "war on terror" will continue to be used to justify the imposition of undemocratic measures and calls for working people to accept the sacrifice of their liberties.

Of all the favourable comments on Brown's performance, the most significant was the ringing endorsement given by Shami Chakrabarti, the director of Britain's oldest civil rights group, Liberty.

Chakrabarti, who has established something of a reputation for opposing the government's anti-terror measures, was widely quoted by the media, stating, "So far, at least, Mr. Brown has passed the first test of his administration. He has not played politics with the terror threat, and has treated this weekend's events as an operational rather than a political matter."

An official June 30 statement by Chakrabarti on Liberty's website went further in solidarising the organisation with the government, paying "enormous tribute to the new Prime Minister, Home Secretary and (Scotland's) First Minister. Recent years have demonstrated just how tempting it can be for democratic leaders to play a dangerous and counter-productive politics with national security. By contrast, so far at least, Mr Brown has resisted partisan posturing or a knee-jerk rush to the statute book. The new government is demonstrating the unifying response that it rightly seeks from all of us."

Brown's not having "rushed" to the statute books, notwithstanding, Chakrabarti has nothing to say about his support for measures that Liberty has long opposed and his aim to bring them into law in his own good time.

Three days later, on July 3, Chakrabarti published her official response to Brown's proposals in parliament the previous day. Once again she seized on whatever positive straws could be grasped to praise the government—in this case a promise to "review" a ban on spontaneous protest outside parliament and to begin a public debate on a "British Bill of Rights and Duties."

The first commits Brown to nothing and leaves all other anti-democratic measures unchanged. The second, a bill of rights and duties, is bound up with plans to opt out of European human rights legislation and to stress that civil liberties are conditional on obligations to the state based on a promotion of "Britishness".

Yet Chakrabarti described the former as a "commitment to free speech" and "an important start". She welcomed "the Prime Minister's commitment to British values, even as the terrorists attempt to shift his course"—adding only the mealy-mouthed caveat that Brown should "remember that my rights and freedoms come from [sic] first from humanity and only second from nationality."

Democratic rights do not "come from nationality" at all. They are universal, extended to all regardless of nationality. The attempt to make them conditional on an acceptance of "British values" and fulfilling certain "duties" to the state is bound up with ongoing efforts to erode the very liberties Chakrabarti is charged with defending.

Chakrabarti's friendly tone towards Brown's government and her failure to even mention the proposal to establish a national security council is no temporary lapse in judgment. She is in fact one of the people of "good will" that have been drafted to discuss the formulation of government policy.

Chakrabarti sits on the Commission on National Security for the 21st Century. A nominally independent body, it is in fact associated with the Institute of Public Policy Research, the most influential pro-Labour think-tank. It is chaired by Lord Robertson, Labour's former Secretary of State for Defence and former Secretary General of NATO, and Lord Ashdown, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats who Brown recently offered a place in cabinet.

Other members of the 17-strong body include:

* Tom Daschle, the former Democrat senator and Senate majority leader.

* Sir Jeremy Greenstock, the former British Ambassador to the United Nations and head of the Ditchley Foundation, dedicated to promoting Anglo-American relations.

* Sir David Omand, the first holder in 2002 of the post of UK Security and Intelligence Coordinator, exercising overall direction on behalf of then Prime Minister Blair of national counter-terrorism strategy.

* Lord (Charles) Guthrie, the former Chief of the Defence Staff between 1997 and 2001 and head of the British Army between 1994 and 1997.

Its founding meeting on May 23 was addressed by then Secretary of State for International Development, Hilary Benn.

Chakrabarti said in her own contribution that the commission was "a golden opportunity to address serious security challenges in a rational, principled and non-partisan manner and to meet *the stated objective of our next Prime Minister*, which is to protect our security without sacrificing hard-won liberties." (Emphasis added)

Chakrabarti was made a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list last month.

Under the guise of "consultation" and "non-partisan" government, the measures being implemented by Brown on the pretext of combating terrorism will escalate and deepen the erosion of democratic freedoms pioneered under Blair. The embrace of these policies by the opposition parties and civil rights campaigners such as Chakrabarti—and their participation in drawing them up—is not an expression of greater democracy. It demonstrates, rather, the absence of any genuine opposition to the curtailing of democratic rights and the readiness to uphold the political requirements of British imperialism at home and abroad.

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