

Conservative Minister Damian Green's arrest highlights worsening threat to democratic rights

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The arrest of Conservative immigration minister, Damian Green, by counter-terrorist police is an extraordinary event that further underscores the assault on democratic rights by the Labour government.

The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for Green, a right-wing politician whose forte is anti-immigrant propaganda. Nevertheless, the fact that Green has been subject to arrest raises fundamental concerns as the extent to which the police are now able openly to intercede in political matters.

Green, after all, was not arrested on allegations of corruption or impropriety. Although he has not yet been charged, the allegation against him concerns his publication of leaked documents he allegedly received from a government whistleblower.

The Tory MP for Ashford, Kent was arrested just before 1400 GMT on Thursday at his constituency home, for "aiding and abetting misconduct in public office".

He was held for nine hours at a London police station while searches were conducted at his home, business premises and his parliamentary office. Up to nine anti-terrorist officers were reported to be involved in the arrest and searches. Green was released without charge just before midnight but was told he must return for further questioning in February.

His arrest is thought to be linked to the arrest ten days earlier of a civil servant for allegedly leaking sensitive government documents, details of which subsequently appeared in pro-Conservative newspapers. They include a Home Office memorandum revealing that the government knew thousands of illegal immigrants were working in Whitehall security jobs (*Daily Mail*) and a letter to a Home Office minister showing he was informed about an illegal immigrant working as a cleaner in parliament (*Sunday Telegraph*).

It should also be noted that Green's arrest came just days after a series of leaks about the government's pre-budget

statement, including that Prime Minister Gordon Brown had considered hiking up Value Added Tax. Writing in the *Times* yesterday, Philip Webster described Green's arrest as "A warning to moles, wherever they might be".

Green's detention has led to charges that the government knew of the police's intentions and had encouraged and/or directed his arrest in order to settle political scores.

Brown and Home Secretary Jacqui Smith have said they were not aware of Green's arrest in advance. Brown was apparently told at 5.00pm that day.

Their denials are considered suspect, however, given that the police are subject to the Home Office in England and Wales and the operation apparently followed a complaint from the government's Cabinet Office. Moreover, Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson (who oversees the Metropolitan Police) and Conservative leader David Cameron said they had been informed of the operation in advance.

In a statement, the Metropolitan Police denied any ministerial involvement in the decision to arrest Green. "The investigation into the alleged leak of confidential government material followed the receipt by the MPS (Metropolitan Police Service) of a complaint from the Cabinet Office. The decision to make today's arrest was taken solely by the MPS without any ministerial knowledge or approval."

The constitutional implications of Green's arrest are not lessened one iota even if the government was not informed in advance--especially given that it involved a police search in parliament.

In his web blog, Conservative MP Douglas Carswell, queried whether the speaker of the House of Commons, Labour's Michael Martin, had agreed to the police search on a parliamentary office.

Carswell wrote, "Anti-terror police raided the Commons office of an opposition spokesman. Not in Zimbabwe, or Pakistan. But in Britain yesterday."

He continued, "If it turns out that the Speaker of the House of Commons gave the go-ahead for this raid, I will be demanding to his face, on every occasion that I can, that Mr Martin now quit. The purpose of the Commons Speaker is to preside over an institution that holds government to account--not to give the green light to police raids against legitimate opposition."

In an update, Carswell wrote, "I phone the Speaker's office to find out if Mr Martin sanctioned the raid. Am told 'there is a process to be followed that was followed.' I shall take that as a yes. Speaker Martin sanctioned the raid on Damian Green's office."

Unsurprisingly, the Tories have taken the opportunity to pose as the guardians of democracy. Cameron described it as "Stalinesque" behaviour. Referring to Winston Churchill's use of leaked information in support of his campaign for rearmament against Nazi Germany, Cameron said, "If this had happened in the 1930s, Churchill would have been arrested."

"What seems to be the case is that [Green] was arrested for making public information that the government didn't want to have made public."

That the Tories are able to posture as upholders of civil liberties is entirely the responsibility of the Labour government which, under the guise of the war on terror, has established the basis for a creeping police state.

Craig Murray is Britain's former ambassador to Uzbekistan turned whistleblower on Labour's tacit support for human rights abuses in the central Asian republic. He headlined his blog Friday, "The Jackboots are on the move."

Noting that as Prime Minister Tony Blair had interceded into due process to stop a corruption case involving British military company BAE Systems and its £43 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia, Murray described Green's arrest as "a step too far in rolling back centuries of democratic achievement. The pretext is the excessive desire of this government to keep all public information secret, and prevent the taxpayer from finding out what has been done in their name and at their expense. This is the most secretive, as well as the most authoritarian, government of the modern era."

He continued, "I can comment with more authority than most in saying that civil servants now have a duty to leak: the official narrative is now so often far from the truth across the whole field of government, that if civil servants do not leak there can be no informed democratic debate. To arrest an opposition MP for finding out what is really happening is a grim, grim move."

Green's arrest raises many important questions—not least who decided that it was appropriate and who sanctioned the use of anti-terrorist officers. Whatever the exact chain of

command in these latest events, which needs to be followed closely, the analysis made by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time of the cash-for-peerages scandal in Britain between 2006 and 2007 has proven to be prescient.

In an unprecedented police operation, Labour's chief fundraiser Lord Levy was arrested in connection with allegations that knighthoods had been offered in return for loans to political parties. For the first time ever, a serving prime minister was questioned by police officers.

The investigation eventually found no evidence of wrongdoing, but the stench of corruption it left played no small role in further undermining Blair and his government. The police investigation had popular backing at the time. "The image is being cultivated of the forces of law and order finally stepping in to clear out the Augean stables of government and restore democratic standards", the WSWs explained.

"In reality, the intervention by the police demonstrates the extent to which forms of rule have been stripped of any genuine democratic content," we continued. "A warning must be made as to the direction in which political life is heading. The decision to launch a police operation at the very heart of government is evidence that the decay of parliamentary rule over which Blair has presided is well advanced.

"The threat of dictatorship does not announce itself fully formed. It emerges under conditions in which social and political tensions have reached such a degree of intensity that it is no longer possible to secure consensus and uphold the rule of capital through the usual constitutional channels.

"It is precisely because the working class has been politically disenfranchised and excluded from events by the degeneration of its old organisations that the fundamental threat to democratic rights emerges."



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