

Failed Detroit bombing used to justify crackdown on British universities

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The British ruling establishment has been quick to use the failed attempt to bomb Flight 253 into Detroit on Christmas Day to demand greater security monitoring. In particular there have been demands for the exertion of greater control over universities. Attention has focused on student societies and on the regulation and restriction of foreign students.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian-born attempted bomber, had studied Mechanical Engineering at University College London (UCL) between 2005 and 2008. During that time he was President of the UCL Islamic Society, and organised a number of speaking events. Abdulmutallab's family have suggested that he may have made contact with Al Qaeda while in London, but they believe that he was trained by Al Qaeda later on a subsequent trip to Yemen. His father, a former banker, alerted US authorities to his suspicions.

In the aftermath of the incident, Home Secretary Alan Johnson stated that Abdulmutallab, who had studied legitimately at UCL, had had his second application for a student visa rejected. Abdulmutallab had claimed for a non-existent course, resulting in the British authorities placing his name on a watch-list. This list is shared with treaty partners, such as the United States. Johnson has described the cooperation between British and US security agencies as "among the most profound and important collaborations in security in the world."

On December 28 Johnson told the BBC that British police and security services were investigating whether Abdulmutallab had been radicalised during his time at UCL.

Staff at UCL, however, have described Abdulmutallab as a quiet student who gave his tutors no cause for concern.

This has not satisfied sections of the media, led by the

Daily Telegraph and the *Times*. Their frenzied attacks on academic "liberalism" have been aimed at justifying a clampdown on university campuses.

Quoting Douglas Murray of the right-wing think tank the Centre for Social Cohesion, one *Telegraph* headline accused UCL of being "complicit" in the radicalisation of students like Abdulmutallab. Under the headline "Academic liberalism is a danger to life," the *Telegraph* editorialised that "Over the past decade, institutes of higher education in London have consistently provided sanctuary for Islamist students who parrot the hate-filled rhetoric of al-Qaeda and its allies."

In another *Telegraph* article Anthony Glees, professor of security and intelligence studies at the University of Buckingham, was quoted as saying, "Universities and colleges like UCL have got to realise that you don't get suicide bombers unless they have first been radicalised.... British universities must look at their Islamic Societies and demand assurances that no radicalisation will be allowed. If they can't give those assurances, they should be disbanded."

There are demands for the security services to be given ever-broader powers and scope. Johnson has pledged to ensure "the most appropriate security measures to protect the public from the terrorist threat wherever it originates from."

A clamp down on student visas is being prepared. Conservative Shadow Home Secretary Chris Grayling has claimed that the Detroit attack showed the need to tighten the student visa system. The Tories are due to announce their proposals for further restrictions on student visas shortly.

Labour has already implemented restrictive changes to student visa requirements. Under the points-based system, students required a university or college to act

as a sponsoring body. At the beginning of last term, the Borders Agency implemented new regulations making the sponsoring bodies responsible for monitoring students' attendance. Failure to provide adequate reports could lead to loss of sponsor status, with potentially catastrophic financial implications for institutions increasingly dependent on higher fees from overseas students. Despite the unhappiness of staff, the universities have complied with the regulations.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown ordered a review of the system in November, with the results expected soon. Ahead of this year's General Election, it is already apparent that there is broad consensus across parliament on visa restrictions. Grayling accused Johnson of being "utterly complacent if he thinks we have a tight and secure student visa system," while the Liberal Democrat spokesman Chris Huhne called for the system to be "properly targeted to ensure we allow the right people in." The *Telegraph* has gone further, criticising the fact that Abdulmutallab was "allowed [sic] to be elected president of the Islamic Society" even though he was not a British citizen.

Then there have been demands for the intervention of the security services on campuses. In an editorial the *Telegraph* complained that "our security forces have consulted vice chancellors in order to impress upon them the urgency of the threat. Unfortunately, that is easier said than done." Rashad Ali, a former member of Hizb ut-Tahrir who now works for "counter-extremism group" Centri, has urged "government and the university authorities" to "gain the confidence to use the powers they already possess to stop radical preachers."

Malcolm Grant, president and provost of UCL, said the institution was "currently providing all assistance to the authorities, and...setting up a full independent review of Mr. Abdulmutallab's time at UCL." In a comment piece in the *Times*, Professor John Sutherland of UCL asked, "At what point must institutional tolerance give way to heavy-handed control?"

One of Abdulmutallab's chief offences at UCL, in the eyes of the right-wing press, was to have organised a "War on Terror" week in 2007. This event, with lectures and seminars on Guantánamo Bay and what the *Times* calls "allegations of torture," was, according to the *Telegraph*, "criticised as anti-Western propaganda."

This is a clear threat against any form of student

political activity opposing the routine illegal detention and torture of prisoners by US imperialism. This repression would surely be aimed at Islamic student groups. But the primary aim of the anti-democratic drive against the campuses is to head off the formation of genuine socialist opposition to imperialist militarism.

These anti-democratic developments take place within the context of a broader attack on public education, particularly at the universities. Facing the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, the government is committed to a savage assault on public finances.

When Chancellor Alistair Darling gave his pre-budget report in November, conspicuous in its absence was any mention of secured funding for tertiary education. Thousands of jobs face elimination and curriculum is threatened with the government demanding universities make £180 million of cuts as "efficiency savings."



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