

UK government to impose Orwellian-style surveillance

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The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition is pushing ahead with plans to allow Britain's security services and police to spy on the activities of every citizen who uses a phone or the Internet. The secret services and police will have unlimited powers to track every single phone call, email, text message and website visit made by anybody in the UK.

The plans were contained within last month's "Strategic Defence and Security Review" in which the government stated, "We will introduce a programme to preserve the ability of the security, intelligence and law enforcement agencies to obtain communication data and to intercept communications within the appropriate legal framework."

They are based on reviving, with a few modifications, the Intercept Modernisation Programme (IMP) first proposed in 2006 by the previous Labour government. The government is implementing this massive surveillance dragnet, despite making an election pledge that it would not do so. The pledge was specifically cited in the "Coalition Agreement" for government, published May 12.

The decision to carry on with the imposition of blanket state surveillance of the entire population exposes as nonsense the civil rights pretensions of the Liberal Democrats. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg used the occasion of his first speech after the coalition came to power to reiterate that the government would "not hold people's internet and e-mail records when there is just no reason to do so".

The reality is that the government has been developing these anti-democratic plans throughout the six months it has been in office. In a barely known and little publicised document, the "Home Office Draft Structural Reform Plan" released in July, the coalition stated it would, "Publish proposals for the storage of internet and e-mail

records, including introducing legislation if necessary". Using language George Orwell would immediately recognise as "Doublespeak", the proposals were listed in a section entitled, "Protect people's freedoms and civil liberties".

In April 2009, the Conservative Party, then in opposition, criticised the Labour government for bringing the European Data Retention Directive (EUDRD) into UK law without any primary legislation. The present security minister, Baroness Neville-Jones, said at the time they would oppose bringing in IMP without primary legislation. Now, according to the *Guardian*, measures preparatory to an "interception modernisation scheme" are to be introduced within weeks.

Home Office sources said they will "build on Labour's proposal to require mobile phone and Internet service providers to collect and store the 'traffic details' of all Internet and mobile phone use," the *Guardian* states. "The decision to push ahead with the 'Big Brother' surveillance scheme follows pressure from the security services, including MI5 and GCHQ, as well as Scotland Yard, who have argued that it is essential to bring phone-tapping into the internet age."

The powers that the government are proposing to, have never been achieved by any regime in history, even in dictatorial states such as fascist Germany. The technology for doing so did not exist. Such a vast snooping operation against the population would require that each of the communication service providers (CSPs) in the UK be legally bound to collect and store all personal data records for at least a year and allow the security services and the police access to them at all times. It has been estimated that the cost of such an operation would be in excess of £2 billion.

The well-worn pretext of the necessary investigations of terrorist activity has again been rolled out to justify the state's adoption of the most anti-democratic and far-

reaching powers. Even so, the government quickly made clear that the use of these vast surveillance powers would not be confined to investigating terror plots. These powers will be used against the entire population and *anyone can be investigated* on an everyday basis. An article on the *Register* web site, October 26, stated, “The [Home Office] spokesman flatly denied claims in *The Guardian* that access to IMP data would be restricted to ‘terror-related’ investigations, however. Communications data is vital to all law enforcement, he said.”

The coalition’s scheme to monitor the Internet and phone usage of anyone, and by dint of that to track the movement of everyone in the British Isles, has barely elicited any protest in the media or the political establishment. The *Guardian* itself relegated its coverage to the inside pages. Its article on Thursday was a small piece, appearing on page 19, documenting the concerns of the Information Commissioner Christopher Graham, over the governments’ plans. A spokesman for Graham said this week, “The commissioner’s key concern is whether the case has been made for the project. On the face of it, the proposal seems disproportionate when any perceived benefits that might be gained from retaining this data are set against the risks to privacy involved.”

Graham is fully aware of what these vast changes in the curtailment of democratic rights would presage. In his July 2009 response to Labour government Home Office document, “Protecting the Public in a Changing Communication Environment”, Graham pointed out, “This proposal represents a step change in the relationship between the citizen and the state. Prior to this, police and intelligence services would have access to information which was already collected and held by CSPs. For the first time this proposal is asking CSPs to collect and create information they would not have previously held, and to go further in conducting additional processing on that information.”

Graham has questioned some of the new government’s proposals as to their “perceived benefits”, and has rejected proposals for all of the additional data collected be kept in a single database, “held by the Government or a central agency”. In response to his concerns, Prime Minister David Cameron has simply promised to work with Graham on the details of the spying operation.

While expressing certain fears over holding communications data on a “population-wide” basis, Graham is not opposed to the use of these new powers against targeted individuals accused of “a serious crime or terrorist act”. He wrote that “if an individual becomes a

suspect in an investigation of a serious crime or terrorist act, then it is perfectly reasonable, indeed desirable, that the authorities then have the power to compel the collection of further communications data in relation to that individual, and in many cases their associates”.

Once the state has such sweeping powers over the private communications and movements of all its citizens, these can be extended at will. The *Guardian* reports without comment, “The Home Office stresses that the scheme would not give the police and security services access to the content of emails or text messages but case-by-case access to the traffic details of who contacted whom at what time and from what location.”

There is no reason whatsoever to accept as good coin that the authorities, having obtained the powers to access this data would not then seek to access its content. In its own, decidedly muted response to the government’s plans, Liberty notes, “Hundreds of public bodies, not just the police and security services, can have access to this type of data, including local authorities. And there is no need for them to go to a court or any other body to access the data—access can be self-authorized (under the Registration of Investigatory Powers Act 2000).”

The carrying out of these measures, without any significant opposition from any section of the political establishment, demonstrates that a turning point has been reached in the erosion of democratic rights in the UK. On the eve of the sharp social conflicts that are to come in opposition to the mass austerity and poverty being imposed by the government, the British ruling elite is putting in place the essential underpinnings of a totalitarian state.



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