

The witch-hunt of Britain's Guardian newspaper

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22 October 2013

The campaign of vilification and intimidation against the *Guardian* newspaper for publishing the disclosures of former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden is without precedent in a supposedly democratic country.

Raids on newspaper offices, the forced destruction of computer drives and threats to arrest journalists are actions more commonly associated with military dictatorships. But this is exactly what has been meted out against the *Guardian*, with threats of worse to come.

On Tuesday, a parliamentary debate is scheduled, instigated by Conservative backbencher Julian Smith, on whether the newspaper is guilty of treason for reporting the illegal surveillance programmes operated by the NSA and Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). Smith has already written to the Metropolitan Police calling for the *Guardian* to be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act and the Terrorism Act 2000.

Earlier, Prime Minister David Cameron, on whose authority the *Guardian* was instructed in July to destroy its computer files containing documents from Snowden, demanded a parliamentary inquiry into the newspaper—a call supported by Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg.

Immediately, the opposition Labour Party's Keith Vaz agreed that the Home Affairs Committee, which he chairs, would undertake such an investigation.

The *Guardian*'s disclosures will also fall under the remit of Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), reinforcing claims that the newspaper's reports threatened national security. Hazel Blears, Labour's representative on the ISC, said that while she could not confirm that it would reach a formal conclusion as to whether the *Guardian* had

“endangered national security”, the ISC would “be taken where the evidence takes us.”

These moves constitute a major escalation of the witch-hunt against the newspaper, which began in August with the detention at Heathrow Airport of David Miranda, the partner of Snowden collaborator and then-*Guardian* journalist Glenn Greenwald.

This escalation has been green-lighted by the intelligence agencies themselves. It was the speech by new MI5 boss Sir Andrew Parker at the start of this month that first insinuated the newspaper had assisted terrorists by making public Snowden's revelations.

The anti-democratic implications of this assault are far reaching. Long considered the respectable mouthpiece of British liberalism, the *Guardian* is being persecuted for doing no more than a newspaper is meant to—disclosing information. For the powers-that-be, such disclosures, insofar as they concern the illegal activities of the state, constitute treasonable actions.

The targeting of the *Guardian* takes place against the backdrop of the establishment parties seeking to impose statutory press control in Britain for the first time in 300 years. Their plans amount to official state censorship, particularly of the Internet. As the moves against the *Guardian* make clear, this will be backed up by the threat of prosecution and imprisonment.

What makes these events even more extraordinary is that not only is the *Guardian* virtually isolated within the political establishment, but some of its most vicious opponents come from the media itself.

This is by no means confined to publications associated with the Conservative Party. Chris Blackhurst, former editor of the misnamed *Independent* newspaper and currently its contents editor, stated in a recent op-ed piece that Snowden's revelations “may be dangerous”. He added, “I would not have published

them.”

“If MI5 warns that this is not in the public interest, who am I to disbelieve them?” the journalist declared.

Blackhurst’s obsequious piece indicates the social impulses involved in the *Guardian*’s isolation. In his youth, he stated, he had been “transfixed” by state abuses and responded as a young journalist “excitedly” to injustices. Now he could no longer get “wound up.”

His remarks underscore the degree to which the media consciously regards itself as an arm of the state. What happened in between Blackhurst’s youth and now cannot be measured solely in years. More important is the lucrative career, social comfort and privileges he has acquired, rendering him only too willing to cover over the state’s abuses. Can there be any doubt that, transported back to Germany in the 1930s, Blackhurst would have few moral or political qualms working directly or indirectly for Goebbels’ propaganda ministry?

The absence of any concern for civil liberties within the ruling elite is the outcome of the decay of democratic norms over a protracted period of time.

This process has accelerated since the economic crash of 2008 and the further growth of social inequality that has followed. It is not accidental that the witch-hunt against the *Guardian* unfolds amidst growing signs of popular opposition to the government’s policies of austerity and war. It comes only weeks after the parliamentary defeat of the government’s resolution for war against Syria and coincides with a series of strikes and protests against the gutting of jobs, welfare and social spending.

The activities of Britain’s spy agency have little to do with a fight against terrorism, as sparsely reported documents released by Snowden to Germany’s *Der Spiegel* indicate. These accuse GCHQ of a massive cyber-attack on Belgium’s partially state-run telecommunications company Belgacom, whose clients include the European Parliament.

That the assault was codenamed “Operation Socialist” confirms the more fundamental purpose of GCHQ’s activities—the control and suppression of the domestic populace. Ultimately, the mass impoverishment determined upon by the ruling elite can be implemented only through dictatorial means.

The Socialist Equality Party unconditionally defends the *Guardian* and its right to publish free from state

interference. But we insist that the defence of press freedoms, free speech and democratic rights cannot be entrusted to any section of the bourgeoisie. This can be taken forward only by a mass movement of the working class in a struggle against the profit system and its political defenders.



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