

The NSA spy scandal and the attack on press freedom

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Recently released police documents on the August 18 arrest and questioning at London's Heathrow airport of David Miranda, the domestic partner of journalist Glenn Greenwald, are a serious warning on the advanced stage of the decay of democracy in Britain and internationally.

They show that Miranda was held on blatantly trumped up terrorism charges, aiming to block reporting on the NSA spying scandal. While British, US, and European intelligence agencies have developed the mass electronic spying apparatus of a police state—as Greenwald and whistleblower Edward Snowden have revealed—the internal security forces have developed the legal and police apparatus of an authoritarian regime.

A document from the Metropolitan Police HQ at Scotland Yard, released as a result of a court action taken out by Miranda, states: “Intelligence indicates that Miranda is likely to be involved in espionage activity which has the potential to act against the interests of UK national security... Additionally the disclosure, or threat of disclosure, is designed to influence a government and is made for the purpose of promoting a political or ideological cause. This therefore falls within the definition of terrorism.”

Such remarks could easily be made by officials of any police-state dictatorship. Under such a broad definition, virtually any genuine reporting on the conduct of the state—which could embarrass or expose criminal behavior by state officials, and is written with distrust towards them—can be pursued as terrorism.

On October 11, Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) endorsed Miranda's detention, declaring: “Given the current nature of the threat from international terrorism... a statutory power to stop, question and search travellers at ports and airports,

without reasonable suspicion is not inherently incompatible with the right to liberty ... or the right to respect for private life.”

In fact, the Miranda case shows how the spread of police searches without reasonable cause has been used to facilitate attacks on basic democratic rights, including freedom of the press, as well as mass searches of people without any link to terrorism. Last year alone, a staggering 60,000 people were “stopped and examined” at UK airports under powers contained in the Terrorism Act of 2000.

The targeting of journalists has been accompanied by action against the *Guardian* newspaper and threats to charge it with endangering national security and treasonous conduct for having published the Snowden revelations.

The arrest of Miranda was preceded by a raid on the offices of the *Guardian*. Editor-in-Chief Alan Rusbridger told how “two GCHQ [Government Communications Headquarters] security experts” oversaw the destruction of hard drives as journalists used drills and grinders to smash memory chips containing encrypted files to avoid having them confiscated.

Cameron, supported by his Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, demanded a parliamentary inquiry into the *Guardian*, which was backed immediately by the opposition Labour Party's Keith Vaz who signed up his Home Affairs Committee for the proposed witch-hunt. He was followed by Hazel Blears, Labour's representative on the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), who said the ISC would investigate whether the *Guardian* had “endangered national security.”

The new head of MI5 was one of several top intelligence personnel who said Snowden's leaks were a

“gift” to terrorists.

Tory back bencher Julian Smith was granted a Westminster Hall debate to make his claim that the *Guardian* should be prosecuted for aiding terrorism and endangering national security. Smith cited the Terrorism Act and the Official Secrets Act as laws under which the *Guardian* could be prosecuted, with the support of Julian Lewis, a member of the ISC and James Brokenshire, Minister for Security at the Home Office.

Last week Cameron threatened the media that they must show “social responsibility” when reporting leaks from the NSA and GCHQ, or he would be forced to use “injunctions or D Notices or the other tougher measures.”

A Defence Advisory Notice is a request, usually honoured, from government to newspapers to keep silent.

Cameron’s remarks were preceded by a resort to the unelected feudal Privy Council to steamroller the introduction of a form of statutory press regulation for the first time in 300 years, with a watchdog imposing a government-dictated code of conduct. Many websites, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, will be covered by the legislation—if they “contain news related material” or have more than one author.

The Terrorism Act 2000 is one of numerous Acts of Parliament, regulations, rules and Orders which collectively give the state extraordinary powers to curtail democratic rights—all supposedly enacted to combat terrorism. It is now being used against journalists, political activists, and newspapers in order to conceal massive state crimes such as mass surveillance of working people in Britain and internationally.

Nothing better demonstrates how far Britain and other NATO countries have already travelled on the road to dictatorship than the spread of such legislation.

From the 18th century, thanks to struggles stretching back to the Cromwellian revolution and beyond and culminating in the ending of pre-publication censorship in 1695, Britain prided itself on having the freest press in the world.

The Fourth Estate was accepted as having the special role as, in the words of Whig politician Thomas B. Macaulay, a “safeguard tantamount, and more than tantamount, to all the rest together” in holding the state

and politicians to account.

This essential function was not determined by the character of this or that publication, many of which were as venal then as they are today, but by the public’s right to know. A free press provided an essential means of preventing the government from determining what is known.

“Mankind are not now to be told they shall not think, or they shall not read,” wrote Thomas Paine in “The Rights of Man” in 1791.

Today press freedom is viewed as an unacceptable threat by a capitalist oligarchy that is terrified of popular opposition to attacks on democratic rights and policies of obscene self-enrichment at the expense of the vast majority of the population. This underlies the present sustained attempt to deny working people their right to be informed of what is being done against them by government and its big business backers.

The imposition of press censorship and criminalising of reporting can be opposed only through the development of a mass movement of the working class in a struggle against the profit system and its political defenders. As Paine himself wrote, government attempts to curtail the publication of an author’s material would be “a sentence on the public, instead of the author, and would also be the most effectual mode of making or hastening revolution.”



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