Political dissidents to be rendered stateless

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The new Counter-Terrorism and Security Bill published by the British government this week must sound alarm bells. Once again, under the guise of the "war against terror", the state is assuming authoritarian powers, including the ability to render a British citizen effectively stateless.

UK passports are issued at the discretion of the home secretary, who has the powers of the executive under the royal prerogative. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the removal of passports from those suspected of—but not necessarily charged with—"terror-related" activities.

According to a 2013 report by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 53 people had been stripped of British citizenship since 2002, 48 of them in just three years under the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. These involved naturalised or dual-citizenship holders, where the home secretary could claim those targeted were not left stateless.

The new bill will empower the home secretary to act against UK-born citizens. It allows police and border officials to seize passports and travel documents for up to 30 days if they believe someone is travelling for terrorist purposes, and on multiple occasions thereafter.

The government claims that the bill does not violate human rights laws, as the exclusion orders are "temporary" and those affected will still be able to return to the UK "on our terms." This is bogus. The state is jettisoning entirely the presumption of innocence and will be entitled to arbitrarily curtail a citizen's freedom of movement based on the "balance of probabilities."

Those subject to exclusion orders will be placed on watch lists, including no-fly lists, and will face five years imprisonment if they attempt to re-enter the UK without government approval. Airlines that fail to supply advance passenger lists will be prevented from landing in Britain.

Those deprived of their passport will be left in a legal limbo. Given that the exclusion orders can be extended for more than two years, targeted individuals could face an extended period of time in the country in which they have been stranded, without access to employment, health and social provisions and legal rights.

Their only legal means of returning home is to agree to be vetted and escorted by the UK security services. Even in the absence of charges, they must consent to the imposition of a Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measure (TPIM), which involves conditions of virtual house arrest, monitored by police, and participation in a "deradicalisation" course. The bill also empowers the home secretary to relocate anyone subject to a TPIM anywhere in the country, internal exile in all but name.

A new statutory duty is to be imposed on colleges, schools, prisons, police and local authorities to "ensure" that individuals are not drawn into "extremism." Internet service providers will be required to retain data on Internet protocol addresses to allow the state to identify individuals accessing "extremist" sites.

The legislation is expected to be fast-tracked through parliament, with all-party approval, before the May 2015 general election. Such haste has nothing to do with the threat of terrorism, or concern for Britons subjected to the barbarity of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) or Al Qaeda.

The bill is the seventh major anti-terror legislation passed by parliament since 9/11. None have done anything to reduce the terror threat, which is fundamentally the result of repeated and on-going US- and UK-led wars of neo-colonial aggression. The proposed powers would not have prevented the horrific beheading of British taxi driver Alan Henning by ISIS, or the brutal slaying of soldier Lee Rigby on a London street. In fact, the recent hit-and-run murder of a soldier

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in Quebec, Canada was carried out by a Muslim convert whose own passport had been seized earlier.

What the latest bill does—as is its intent—is to cement the juridical framework of a police state in the UK. The definition of what constitutes "terrorist" or "extremist" activities is deliberately so vague as to make it applicable to anyone the state deems a threat to its own interests.

This has international ramifications. The British legislation is based on the US-drafted Resolution 2178 adopted by the United Nations Security Council meeting on September 24. Demanding the suppression of "foreign fighters," the resolution is legally binding on all 193 UN member states, backed up with economic sanctions or force.

Several countries, including Canada, Australia and France, have already taken measures to seize passports, criminalise travel to areas deemed "off limits" and block websites. New Zealand is to follow suit, as are a number of European countries, including Germany, which can revoke passports in certain instances, and is preparing new legislation to seize identity cards.

As always, measures passed in the name of combating Islamic extremism will be used to suppress every expression of political dissent. The proposed UK orders will apply to those undertaking "harmful activities," the definition of which includes the risk of "harassment, alarm or distress" or which constitutes a "threat to the functioning of democracy."

Home Secretary Theresa May said that "extremism" covered those who consider "a woman's intellect as 'deficient'," and who denounce "people on the basis of their religious beliefs." On this basis, other "offences" can be added at will.

Washington carried out the most high-profile and politically significant passport seizure, directed not against a violent "extremist" or "terrorist," but against former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden. In June 2013, the 29-year-old whistleblower performed an invaluable public service when he exposed the illegal mass spying network deployed globally on all electronic communications by the US and British intelligence agencies.

In retaliation, Washington deemed Snowden a facilitator of "terrorism" and charged him with three counts under the 1917 Espionage Act, introduced to criminalise opposition to World War I, which carries a possible death sentence.

The US government also stripped Snowden of his passport, leaving him stranded in a Moscow airport transit lounge for more than four weeks. Facing the threat of extraordinary rendition to the US, he was forced to make hurried appeals for asylum to 20 countries—all of which rejected his request—before being accepted by Russia.

As the WSWS explained at the time, Snowden's courageous stance terrified the ruling elite because it epitomised the attitude of an entire generation, which had become alienated from and hostile to its agenda of militarism and dictatorship. By leaving Snowden trapped in a "planet without a visa", the US government hoped not only to silence the NSA whistleblower, but to intimidate others.

More than a year on, the crisis facing the international bourgeoisie has deepened. Everywhere social inequality is growing, while the threat of a new imperialist world war comes ever closer. That is why the precedent established in Snowden's case is now being rolled out globally.

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