

UK government pledges further spying powers and to “move on” from Snowden

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This week, UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond spoke on “intelligence and security” at London’s Royal United Services Institute. His speech was a chilling indication of the extent to which the government intends to further strengthen the apparatus of the security services.

Hammond’s speech began with ludicrous claims that Britain’s security services, MI5, MI6 and the Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ) were open to public scrutiny and “accountable to Parliament. Their actions are subject to detailed Ministerial oversight...”

He even boasted of an enhanced “system of oversight” and “strengthened” safeguards against abuses.

He adopted this cynical pose only in order to insist that the security services must perforce operate in secret and be given enhanced powers to spy on everyone. This was, he continued, made necessary by the threats from “international terrorist organisations”; “potential state adversaries” that he identified as North Korea, Iran and, above all, Russia; and the “radicalisation of individual terrorists.”

Hammond then proceeded to vilify anyone opposing such repressive measures or raising concerns over democratic rights.

“Of course, there are some who will never accept that our intelligence agencies play a legitimate role in helping the State to fulfil its first duty: the duty to safeguard its citizens,” he pontificated. “There are some who remain wilfully blind to the distinction between the unacknowledged, unregulated, underhand intelligence capabilities of *a repressive regime, directed against its own people, and the agencies of this and other democratic countries, where intelligence is directed towards keeping our citizens safe* and is

subject to the most robust systems of oversight” (emphasis added).

The exercise of wilful blindness is, of course, Hammond’s.

His assertions that massive surveillance of British citizens is a benign act of protection have been made necessary above all by the revelations of former National Security Agency (NSA) whistle-blower Edward Snowden. Among the many examples of mass surveillance he disclosed was the Tempora system run by GCHQ.

Tempora, which shares all its information with the American NSA, employs 500 analysts and monitors and stores all electronic and phone call data not only of all British citizens, but those of at least 2 billion people internationally.

Hammond knows that Snowden has created a major political problem for the ruling class by exposing their surreptitious and entirely unregulated spying on every man, woman and child in the UK. His speech was meant in the first instance to reassure Britain’s spies that they will be protected from any possible fall-out and their criminal actions would be allowed to continue.

His speech came just two days before parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) issued a report whitewashing GCHQ’s mass surveillance programme, concluding that it was “essential.”

Hammond professed to be “conscious, in the wake of the Snowden allegations and in the light of upcoming parliamentary and other inquiries” of the “need to address public concerns about the transparency of the regulatory framework and the powers contained within it.”

But, he added, “I am also clear, that this debate cannot be allowed to run on forever.”

Declaring a need to “move on, sooner rather than later,” Hammond stated that he, Prime Minister David Cameron and Home Secretary Theresa May are “determined that we should draw a line under the debate” and to then give “our agencies ... the powers they need.”

There has, in fact, never been a “debate” about the illegal practices of the NSA and GCHQ. Quite the reverse. The government attempted to repress the dissemination of Snowden’s revelations. This included the despatch of security agents to the *Guardian*’s headquarters to oversee the destruction of hard drives containing Snowden’s information, and threats to close the newspaper and jail its editor, Alan Rusbridger

An indication of the further powers Hammond is demanding for the security services is provided by his response to revelations that MI6 was well aware of the activities of Mohammed Emwazi, the British man dubbed “Jihadi John” by the media and thought to be the person seen in several videos executing captives of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or ISIL).

“The exposure of the alleged identity of one of the most murderous ISIL terrorists over the last few weeks has seen some seeking to excuse the terrorists and point the finger of blame at the agencies themselves,” Hammond complained. “We are absolutely clear: the responsibility for acts of terror rests with those who commit them. But a huge burden of responsibility also lies with those who act as apologists for them.”

This turns reality on its head. Emwazi’s name only became public knowledge on February 26, after months during which it was concealed by the security services, thanks to a report in the *Washington Post*.

It then transpired that Emwazi had been known to the security services as an active jihadist since 2006, but was still able to leave Britain even though he was a prominent member of a watched terror cell. It has since emerged that he had known links to the July 7, 2005 London bomb plotters who killed 52 people in Britain’s worst-ever terrorist atrocity.

At least two of the four bombers responsible for explosions on London Underground trains and a bus—Mohammad Sidique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer—were also known to the intelligence services. Intelligence chiefs had warned then Prime Minister Tony Blair that Al Qaeda was planning a “high priority” attack on the London Underground network.

The US and UK security services even had a “super-grass,” Mohammed Junaid Babar, who was arrested just one year earlier after having trained Mohammad Sidique Khan in Pakistan in 2003. Babar served only four and a half years of a possible 70-year term in a US prison.

Hammond claims that the UK is not a “repressive regime.” Then what does one call a state that engages in conspiracies against its own people—up to and including allowing terrorist atrocities to take place—in order to justify blanket surveillance and a barrage of legislation eliminating long-held democratic rights?

Hammond speaks for a government with blood on its hands, including participating in the war for regime change in Libya and a planned war against Syria that involved making millions of pounds and weapons caches available to Islamist groups such as ISIS.

But there is nothing that he says or does that distinguishes him from the Labour Party—architects of the Afghan and Iraq wars and instigators, along with the Bush administration in Washington, of the accompanying “war on terror.”

Every political representative of the ruling elite is measured by their paymasters against their readiness to trample on democratic rights and to resort to ever more overt repression so British imperialism can assert its predatory ambitions by military force all over the world and impose savage austerity on workers at home.



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