

Britain's anti-terror law and the global assault on democratic rights

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In the year marking 800 years since England's Magna Carta, which asserted that kings could not simply impose their will without oversight and freemen could not be punished unless they violated the law of the land, Britain's new Conservative government is preparing a massive assault on civil liberties.

The Tories are set to enact new legislation targeting "extremists" that poses a fundamental threat to political opponents of the government and to the working class. The claim that the new law is aimed simply or primarily at Islamic terrorists is a lie.

Under the legislation's provisions, the authorities will be able to punish anyone engaged in "harmful" behaviour, ranging from public disorder to threatening the functioning of democracy. Individuals or groups subject to "extremist disruption orders" and "banning orders" will be compelled to submit to the police all material they intend to publish, including on social media. Individuals may also be prohibited from attending public gatherings and speaking at demonstrations or protests.

Prime Minister David Cameron indicated the sweep of the government's intentions when he proclaimed that Britain has been a "passively tolerant society for too long, saying to our citizens: as long as you obey the law, we will leave you alone." Freedom from persecution by the state will no longer be guaranteed, even to those who obey the law.

The British government's proposal is only the latest in a raft of anti-democratic measures adopted internationally in recent months. The new push for police state powers was initiated by the United States.

In a speech at the United Nations last September, President Barack Obama called on Washington's allies to step up efforts to combat Islamic extremism. The call came shortly after the US initiated its latest war of

aggression in the Middle East with the bombardment of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) positions in Iraq and Syria.

In February, Obama hosted a terrorism summit in Washington involving 65 states. The US president remarked in a speech that both domestic and foreign policies had to target not only "terrorists who are killing innocent people," but also the "ideologies, the infrastructure of extremists—the propagandists, recruiters, the funders who radicalize and recruit or incite people to violence."

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time that such all-embracing formulations could "potentially include virtually anyone who condemns the supposedly 'moderate' policies of US imperialism."

Within weeks of this summit, draconian measures have been imposed in a number of countries.

Last month, the French parliament adopted a new anti-terror law allowing for a vast expansion of state surveillance. Seizing on January's attack on the offices of the publication *Charlie Hebdo*, the Socialist Party government of François Hollande included in the law an increase in military and intelligence service positions so as to expand monitoring of the Internet and social networking sites. Intelligence agents will be authorized to read documents of individuals under surveillance and a new database for air travel is to be established.

In Canada, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper is rushing a law through parliament that hands draconian new powers to the intelligence services. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) will now be empowered to actively "disrupt" groups considered to threaten economic or national security or the country's territorial integrity. The CSIS will be given a green light to violate the Canadian Constitution's

Charter of Rights and Freedoms and break virtually any law in so doing.

As in the case of Cameron's forthcoming legislation, the definition of national security threats in Canada's Bill C-51 is so broad and elastic as to cover political opponents of the government's militarist foreign policy and striking workers.

Bill C-51 also provides for the prosecution of individuals accused of "promoting terrorism," in line with similar provisions passed in Australia last year targeting free speech.

A significant feature of the new "anti-terrorism" and "anti-extremist" laws is the rapidity with which they are being implemented. Over the course of a few months, legislation has been enacted in France and rammed through Canada's House of Commons that undermines long-standing democratic norms. The British law is due to be included in the May 27 Queen's Speech, which outlines the government's legislative priorities, and will be implemented within months.

There is no serious opposition within the ruling elite internationally to the abandonment of democratic procedures and implementation of police state measures. The Cameron government's new law was presented at the end of an election campaign in which all of the major parties upheld the right of the intelligence services to continue their mass surveillance of the population, supported Britain's aggressive militarist foreign policy abroad, and advocated fresh attacks on the social rights of workers at home.

The British Labour Party, during its thirteen years in power, oversaw the strengthening of police powers to detain suspects, codified in the 2001 Terrorism Act, the criminalisation of the "encouragement" and "incitement" of terrorism in 2006, and Britain's leading role in the operation of a global spying network in alliance with the US National Security Agency (NSA).

The US led the way in the initial assault on democratic rights in the aftermath of 9/11, with the passage of the Patriot Act, the opening of the gulag at Guantanamo, the policies of rendition and torture, and the vast expansion of the NSA's spying programme.

Edward Snowden's revelations brought to light the fact that all of the major imperialist powers are complicit in the mass surveillance of their own

populations.

The claim that these governments are pursuing a crusade for democracy in the supposed "war on terror" has been exposed as a fraud. This was most recently illustrated by the revelation that the 2011 assassination of Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden came after US intelligence had been aware for a year that he was being sheltered by Pakistani intelligence.

In pursuit of their imperialist interests around the globe, the US and its allies have been more than willing to collaborate with the same Islamic extremist groups they cite to justify attacks on democratic rights domestically. In both Libya and Syria, the Western powers backed forces loyal to Al Qaeda, some of which went on to form ISIS. So brazen was the support for jihadist forces in Libya that, as revealed recently by the *Ottawa Citizen*, Canadian military officials joked in 2011 that NATO warplanes were operating as "Al Qaeda's air force."

There are two interconnected reasons for the establishment of the infrastructure for dictatorship. First, as the danger mounts of a global conflagration between the imperialist powers, fears grow within the bourgeoisie of the potential for a mass movement in opposition to militarism.

Second, the same limitless self-enrichment by the financial oligarchy that animates the turn to militarism and colonial-style wars of conquest underlies the assault on jobs, wages and essential services that Cameron has declared the new "age of austerity."

The prevailing level of social inequality—the ever greater concentration of wealth at the very top of society alongside the impoverishment of the vast majority—is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. The preservation of such a social order demands coercion and state violence.



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