

The end of democracy in Britain

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One would not normally suggest *Hansard*, the official record of British parliamentary proceedings, as recommended reading for every class-conscious worker and youth. But the transcript of Monday's debate, under the title "Syria: Refugees and Counter-terrorism," is an exception.

On that day, Britain's prime minister, David Cameron, stood to inform parliament that some months before he had authorised the extrajudicial murder of three British citizens in Syria.

Reyaad Khan, 21, Ruhul Amin, 26, and a third unnamed individual were killed in a drone attack carried out by the Royal Air Force in Raqqah on August 21. Three days later, another British national, Junaid Hussain, 21, was killed in a US drone strike, Cameron said.

The prime minister's statement was unprecedented. For the first time in modern history, outside of war, the head of government not only admitted, but boasted, that he had authorised the murder of British citizens.

Yet his disclosure—sinister in all its legal and political ramifications—drew no response, much less protest, from those assembled.

Acting Labour Party leader Harriet Harman thanked the prime minister for briefing her earlier in the morning, asking only if he would "confirm that this is the first occasion in modern times on which that has been done?" and whether the attorney general's legal advice sanctioning the attack would be published.

Cameron confirmed for the "Right hon. and learned lady" that the resort to state-sanctioned murder was, indeed, "a new departure," and one "we would repeat..."

Not even that menacing answer solicited a response from the opposition benches. Angus Robertson (Scottish National Party) merely complained that the statement had not been "shared in advance," while Caroline Lucas (Green Party) acted as if nothing

worthy of note had occurred.

Likewise, the "left" Labour leadership contender, Jeremy Corbyn, studiously avoided any mention of the prime minister's extraordinary admission. His silence is a thousand times more politically revealing than all his demagogic blather and makes clear that Corbyn is as much a part of the "deep state" as any of those he pretends to oppose.

The spectacle was made all the more grotesque by the fact that it took place during the 800th anniversary year of the Magna Carta, only recently the subject of a major commemorative exhibition at the British Library.

The "Great Charter" of 1215 set forth limits on the repressive powers of the state and asserted basic legal rights of citizens with its provision that "No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land."

The universal content of the Charter was to find political, intellectual and constitutional expression in the English Civil War (1641-1649), the Enlightenment, and the French and American revolutions of the 18th century. On the basis of immense social and political upheavals, the concept of the inherent "rights of man" against executive fiat was enshrined as the defining characteristic separating democratic governance from police-military dictatorship.

To be sure, the British bourgeoisie has frequently violated this principle. It has a long and bloody history, nowhere more so than in Ireland. But even there, its murderous policy was carried out covertly and always officially denied.

No longer. On Monday, Cameron staged the political equivalent of a smash-and-grab raid on the British Library and poured gasoline over the Charter, while his

audience looked on in mute compliance.

The prime minister's reference to "meticulous" planning in advance of the drone attack and awaiting the "optimum time" to strike refutes any claim that his actions were motivated by a desire to protect the British public against an imminent terror threat.

But even if the allegations against Khan and Amin were true, that would not alter the fact that the cold-blooded, extrajudicial executive murder of a citizen is an impeachable act, a "high crime and misdemeanour."

The death penalty was abolished in the UK in 1965. If now anyone posing with a gun or propagandising against British policy can—without the presentation of charges, much less a court verdict upholding them—be placed on a "kill list" at the discretion of a handful of ministers and their spooks, what remains of due process? Who is next, and where? There is absolutely no reason to assume that government by murder will be carried out exclusively beyond the borders of the United Kingdom.

This is by no means a national phenomenon. The policy of targeted assassination, begun in Israel, is now part of an international trend in which governments compete for bragging rights over the frequency and efficiency of their "hits." From the United States, to France and now Britain, executive responsibility has been redefined as the readiness to sanction state assassinations.

Under the guise of the "war on terror," the doctrine of pre-emptive war has evolved into one of pre-emptive torture and now pre-emptive murder.

There is no wall separating the actions of the bourgeoisie overseas and what they will do at home. The assault on civil liberties in Britain, including pervasive state surveillance, has been accompanied by a "shoot-to-kill" policy that claimed the life of an innocent Brazilian worker, Jean Charles de Menezes, on a London subway in July 2005.

There is a 20th century historical parallel with this state of affairs—Hitler's "Night of the Long Knives," carried out between June 30 and July 2, 1934. The shocking character of these events was not just the readiness of the Nazi regime to openly murder its political opponents, but also the acceptance of such official criminality by the German political establishment. That bloody event formed the backdrop for Carl Schmitt, the "crown jurist" of the Third Reich,

to proclaim the pseudo-legal concept of the "state of exception," which freed the executive power from any legal restraint and made violence, torture and murder the norm.

Today, world capitalism is once again mired in economic crisis, and social inequality has reached malignant proportions. Just as in the 1930s, the bourgeoisie's response to the political threat posed by an angry and restive working class is the turn to dictatorship.



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