

UK: Johnson government plans draconian new anti-terror laws

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Conservative Home Secretary Priti Patel intends to rush through a further raft of anti-terror legislation, with a bill to be brought before Parliament by mid-March.

The counter-terrorism bill would introduce minimum 14-year prison terms for those convicted of preparing acts of terrorism or directing a terrorist organisation and lie-detector tests for those on or seeking probation. Annual spending on counter-terror policing will be increased by £90 million next year, to nearly a billion pounds (£906 million).

Also under consideration are plans to criminalise the simple possession of “terrorist propaganda,” i.e., anything deemed to glorify or encourage extremism. Currently, only the distribution of such material, or possession of material considered useful to the commissioning of a terrorist act, are criminal.

These announcements spearhead a law-and-order campaign with grave consequences for democratic rights. Long minimum sentences will do nothing to address the complex roots of terrorist atrocities, not least in the foreign policy of the UK government. They will be used to pave the way for harsher sentencing in all other areas.

The lie detector proposals were criticised as “untested” and “knee-jerk” by civil rights group Liberty. Lie detectors are currently only used by probation officers in England and Wales on convicted sex offenders and domestic abuse perpetrators. Given their unreliability, with an accuracy rate as low as 60 percent according to some critics, their results cannot be used as evidence in a UK court. This proposal may signal a broader change. Their introduction will be used to provide excuses to ignore rehabilitation work and justifications for further attacks on individual rights.

In defending these measures and their rush into law,

ministers have invoked the November 2019 London Bridge terror attack, which saw Usman Khan, formerly convicted of terrorism offences and recently released early from prison, murder two young Cambridge graduates. One of these victims, Jack Merritt, had worked extensively in prisoner rehabilitation. His father stated publicly after the tragedy, “Jack lived his principles; he believed in redemption and rehabilitation, not revenge, and he always took the side of the underdog.

“We know Jack would not want this terrible, isolated incident to be used as a pretext by the government for introducing even more draconian sentences on prisoners, or for detaining people in prison for longer than necessary.”

When Justice Secretary Robert Buckland was asked about these concerns in an interview with Sky News, he responded bullishly, “I make no apology for putting public protection at the top of the agenda.”

Merritt’s father has also called the government’s lie detector proposals a “cynical, headline-grabbing gimmick” and criticised plans for long minimum sentences: “Keeping terrorists in prison longer will not per se keep people safe, particularly if they are exposed to radicalisation inside.”

Responding to the threats to make possession of extremist material a criminal offence, Liberty officer Rosalind Comyn said, “The UK already has oppressive counter-terror laws which put our freedom to think, debate and learn in jeopardy. Making the law even more heavy handed would undermine our freedom of thought and our right to free expression, without making us any safer.”

David Gottlieb, a defence lawyer in many major terrorism trials, raised the dangerous implications of this proposal given the UK’s “broad and far-reaching”

definition of terrorism.

Both comments point to the huge range of powers now accrued by the state under anti-terror legislation. Individuals can be detained without charge for 28 days, held and searched at ports, airports and international railways stations, placed under indefinite house arrest and have their electronic devices, browsing history and bank details accessed by the authorities—all solely on the “suspicions” of the intelligence services.

The recent 2019 Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act made it an offence to stream or in any way view online material deemed likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism—even in the absence of any demonstrable criminal intent. It also criminalised travelling to or remaining in certain designated overseas areas and outlawed “reckless” “expressions of support” for a proscribed organization—an extension of the already dangerously broad offence of “inviting support” for such organisations.

In 2018, the “Stansted 15” were found guilty of terrorism offences for blocking the departure of a deportation flight from London Stansted Airport.

In 2013, terror legislation was used to detain and seize the journalistic materials of David Miranda, the partner of former *Guardian* journalist Glenn Greenwald, at Heathrow Airport. Greenwald had been working with US whistleblower Edward Snowden on his revelations of global and industrial-scale state surveillance.

Patel’s latest announcements come just days after it was revealed that dozens of left-wing and environmental protest groups are included in a “guidance document” for the Prevent counter-terrorism programme, an initiative which already violates the right to privacy and free expression.

The government’s dictatorial intentions are now so far exposed that its chief adviser on extremism, Sara Khan, felt obliged to call for a rethink on the use of the “extremist” designation. Khan said, “It is right that CTPSE (Counter Terrorism Policing South East) have recalled their guidance on Extinction Rebellion. Our police, security and statutory bodies have a duty to assess complex risks every day to protect the young and vulnerable from extremism which can present itself from a diverse range of ideologies as our work has shown.

“I believe it is in our country’s interest that we have a clearer description and consensus of extremism which can be used by the police, government and public bodies to help them carry out their roles.

“A clearer description will also help build a whole society response by providing a better understanding.”

Khan’s words make clear that she is a trusted instrument of the establishment. She welcomed Lord Carlile’s appointment to lead an “independent” review of Prevent last August, four months before he was forced to step down after a legal challenge by Rights Watch UK over questions of his impartiality. The fact that she is voicing concerns is a mark of just how far and fast Patel and the Tory party intend to go.

While even the government’s own mandarins are balking at the speed of the turn to authoritarianism, the Labour Party is attacking the government from the right. Beating the law-and-order drum as loudly as possible, the “left” Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott commented, “After 10 years in government, a major overhaul now is actually an admission of failure. Major terrorist outrages have occurred all too frequently, including attacks by perpetrators who were known to the security services.

“The fight against terrorism has been undermined by cuts to policing, including community policing, a lack of effective coordination between police and security services as well as the flawed Prevent programme. All of these need to change if we are going to improve the safety of our citizens.”



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