

# British government to use treason laws targeting Russia and China to suppress domestic dissent

Simon Whelan  
27 August 2020

The UK's 1351 Treason Act has stood, with amendments, for hundreds of years. The Act of Parliament is so old it was initially written in Norman French and distinguishes two forms of treason: high treason, disloyalty to the crown, and the lesser charge of petit treason, when deemed disloyal to a subject of the sovereign.

The last trial for high Treason in the UK was that of William Joyce, infamously known as “Lord HawHaw,” an American born fascist and wartime Nazi propagandist, who died by hanging almost 75 years ago at Wandsworth Prison in 1946.

Today, as part of its offensive against democratic rights, Boris Johnson's Conservative government is planning to repurpose the Treason Act as a political tool to suppress dissent and protest in the UK. Their moves are designed to exacerbate an already poisonous political atmosphere and advance moves towards a police state. In parallel, the Espionage Act and Official Secrets Act are also to be reformulated.

A senior government source said Home Office officials have their “foot very much on the gas” to publish the new treason laws this autumn as an integral component of a defence and security review.

Johnson is understood to want the new measures on the UK statute books “within months rather than years.” Such haste is a sure sign of the febrile political situation in the UK. The Tory government is acutely aware of the growing opposition by British workers to its policies, both at home and abroad.

The proposed new acts will mean those deemed to have sworn allegiance to a foreign power or organisation are automatically criminalised if they operate in or attempt to re-enter the UK.

Under the changes being considered, merely voicing opinions and facts associated with the hindrance of British interests abroad—however the government defines this—will make citizens open to accusations of treason. Individuals and

organisations accused by the government of providing succour to those deemed enemies of the UK will be prosecuted.

The aim is to secure a hostile political atmosphere, under which citizens are reticent to voice dissenting opinions in public.

The law changes will criminalise those accused of acting on behalf of a “hostile” nation or who travel abroad to fight with armed groups. But socialists and progressives communicating a political message advocating international or global movements and solutions rather than national and parochial ones will be vulnerable to prosecution.

The government intends to utilize such laws as weapons with which to combat states deemed hostile to British interests, primarily Russia and China, by criminalising collusion, including possibly business and political links, with individuals from these states.

Ultimately, however, the government's aim—beyond asserting an increasingly aggressive foreign policy—is directed against opposition emerging from the working class towards their homicidal pandemic policy, war, militarism, and austerity.

The UK's Law Commission is the statutory body that reviews laws in England and Wales and makes recommendations whether laws need updating. They intended to review the UK law on treason in 2008, under the last Labour government, but the project was shelved because it had “ceased to be of contemporary relevance.” “In the Middle Ages,” reasoned the commission, “England was more often than not at war. It is questionable whether treason offences are required in peacetime.”

The government is using the Intelligence Security Committee's (ISC) report into alleged but unproven “Russian interference” in British politics as a means to remodel treason legislation. Despite the report finding no evidence of Russian interference, the Home Office, together with anti-Russia hawks like Anne Applebaum and the

former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele, and media outlets—primarily the *Guardian*—present Russia as a serious security threat to Britain.

In addition to contributing to the report, ex-MI6 officer Steele is closely associated with another recent dossier, this time on the subject of Chinese influence, which is also being used to bolster attempts to alter the Treason Act.

According to Steele, the Chinese regime seeks to influence the British elite by conducting subversive activities and seeking to influence UK politics, academia, and business to further China's foreign policy. The content of the China dossier has not been made public and was shown only to a small number of parliamentarians and media organisations, including *Sky News*. Steele has form. In 2016 he compiled what became known as the Steele Dossier, a compilation of unverified and salacious charges against Trump that alleged links with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Sajid Javid, the then Home Secretary, first raised the prospect of a redefinition of the British treason law to tackle “hostile state activity” last year. Despite being subsequently promoted to chancellor last year—a position he then resigned from—Javid still plays an important role in the Tory party. He insists that the UK must treat the alleged threat of Russian and Chinese cyber-attacks as it does terrorism.

“It is crucial,” argued Javid in the *Mail on Sunday* last month, “that we give the police and security services more legal tools.” The Putin government was an “immediate and urgent threat to our national security.”

He continued, “Since the 1990s, we have made well-intentioned attempts to work with Russian business and their government. This has spiraled into members of the Russian elite—with close links to Putin and his intelligence services—extending their influence across the British establishment and using London as a financial laundromat.”

Javid drew comparisons between Russia and China: “Similarly to Russia's blurring of state and corporate activity, Beijing has been accused of using state-backed businesses to orchestrate the takeover of strategic UK companies. Where this fails, they have sometimes resorted to corporate espionage to get at sensitive information.”

In seeking to impose more sweeping treason laws, the government is heavily utilizing the case of Shamima Begum, who, having been groomed online, left Britain aged 15, in 2015, to join the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria, along with two school friends. The two childhood friends with whom Begum travelled to the Levant are both dead, as are two children born to Begum. She currently resides in a squalid Syrian refugee camp.

As home secretary, Javid stripped Begum of British citizenship to stop her returning from Syria. This made her stateless, which is illegal under international law. The Nazi

regime in Germany stripped Jews and opponents of their regime of citizenship in order to deprive them of their basic rights. Since then, citizenship has been understood as the “right to have rights” and popularly considered irrevocable.

Lawyers representing Begum took legal action against the Home Office. Javid commented in his *Mail on Sunday* piece on the necessity for “repurposing our ancient treason laws to cover Britons who operate on behalf of a hostile nation or go abroad to fight alongside terrorist groups.

“Too often it feels as if our laws work against a common sense of justice and security. The recent Court of Appeal decision on Shamima Begum is just the latest example.”

This was a reference to a senior judge ruling that Begum could only have a “fair and effective appeal” if “permitted to come into the United Kingdom to pursue her appeal.” The government appealed that ruling and on July 31 won permission at the Court of Appeal to fight, at the Supreme Court, Begum's appeal against being stripped of her British citizenship.

Democratic rights and civil liberties are being decimated at breakneck speed. As recently as 2014, the then Justice Minister for the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government, Simon Hughes, was asked whether the offence of treason was “available for use by prosecuting authorities against UK citizens participating in jihad in the Middle East.” He responded at the time that the offence of treason was outdated, and counter-terrorism powers were more than sufficient.

In their rush to overturn centuries old democratic rights, the Tory government and right-wing media neglect to mention that IS, with whom Begum is accused of associating, emerged from the debacle of the 2003 US and UK illegal invasion of Iraq. IS and countless other Islamic terrorist groups fighting in the Syrian civil war were trained, armed, and incited against the minority Baathist Alawite regime in Damascus by British, American, Israeli, Gulf, Turkish and Saudi military intelligence.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**