

UK Tory and Labour parties plan joint push for “extremism” legislation

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On Thursday, the British government will officially announce its new definition of “extremism”, the next stage in its criminalisation of protests against the Gaza genocide and of anti-war and socialist politics. Communities Secretary Michael Gove intends to name specific organisations.

The new definition is formally only a guide to government departments and public institutions like local councils and universities, encouraging them to cut all ties with groups labelled “extremist”. But the consequences will be far broader.

The government intends this redefinition to set the standard for a statutory, criminal designation of “extremism” and to energise the right-wing and pressure the police to adopt a more aggressive response towards protesters than they have so far been prepared to do. Revelations last week that guidance documents are in circulation under Prevent—the government’s “radicalisation” surveillance scheme—identifying “socialism”, “communism” and “anti-fascism” as gateways to terrorism provide a glimpse of the police-state measures in preparation.

Civil liberties, Muslim and climate groups have denounced the proposals. Liberty, Amnesty International, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the Muslim Association of Britain were among dozens of organisations behind an open letter demanding the government “reverse the recent crackdown on the right to protest and stop conflating protests with extremism; abandon the expansion of the definition of extremism and proposals to bar MPs from engaging with certain groups” and “refrain from amplifying divisive language which could inflame tensions within and between communities.”

Jacob Smith, of human rights advocacy group Rights

and Security International, commented, “For years we have expressed concern about how the government’s broad concept of ‘extremism’ could be open to politicised abuses. It appears that this concern has now been realised through a blatant distinction between how the government want to treat people on the left versus people on the right under Prevent.

“Our concern is only heightened by government rhetoric during the past few days that appears to be targeting British Muslims and protesters for Palestinian rights.”

The government is acting so quickly, it has taken even some of its closest supporters by surprise, prompting calls for a more judicious approach. This is out of fear that the anti-war movement may escape the narrow political confines of appeals to the government and Labour opposition to support a ceasefire—along with other members of the “international community”—placed on it by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the Stop the War Coalition.

There are a range of motivations for these concerns.

On the extreme right flank of the ruling Conservative Party, there are fears that the government’s authoritarian zeal, and attempts to provide some political cover for a measure aimed squarely at the left, will see causes close to their hearts—like anti-abortion and anti-trans campaigns—caught in the extremism net. Even if not, the most deranged are worried that the definition would provide a “woke” Labour Party the tools to do so.

Far more significant is the open letter sent by 12 senior political figures involved with policing, extremism and count-terror legislation, including three former Tory home secretaries, urging the government to secure “as broad a consensus as possible” before proceeding with its plans. The former home secretaries

are Priti Patel, Sajid Javid and Amber Rudd. Other signatories include Neil Basu, former head of counter-terror policing and Lord Dannatt, former chief of the general staff (head of the British Army).

Current Labour MP and chair of the home affairs select committee John Denham is also listed, alongside former Labour MPs, now both Tory-appointed lords and government advisers, Lord Mann (John Mann) and Lord Walney (John Woodcock). Mann and Woodcock were leading figures alongside their Tory counterparts in mounting the antisemitism slanders against Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party and now bang the drum of "left-wing antisemitism" on behalf of the Tory government.

As with the antisemitism witch-hunt, the campaign against "extremists" seeks to mobilise the joint forces of the Tory and Labour parties and a friendly media behind a series of lies aimed at outlawing left-wing and anti-war sentiment. The letter makes an explicit appeal for a Tory-Labour partnership to get the new anti-protest measures on the books, and on the streets, as quickly as possible:

"In the run up to a general election it's particularly important that that consensus is maintained and that no political party uses the issue to seek short term tactical advantage.

"We urge the Labour Party and the Conservative party to work together to build a shared understanding of extremism and a strategy to prevent it that can stand the test of time, no matter which party wins an election."

Speaking on Monday, Security Minister Tom Tugendhat told reporters he "absolutely" agreed with these words, adding "and that's exactly what we're doing. And in fact, I was speaking at a conference on Friday about extremism organised by Onward [a Conservative-aligned thinktank] and by Labour Together [a Labour-aligned thinktank]."

These interventions are directed against suggestions that the government, in the words of one headline, "will use new list of extremists to embarrass Labour," by naming climate or other activist groups with which it has links.

The warning sounded by the letter's signatories, some of the most right-wing, anti-democratic figures in British politics, is that the task at hand is too important to be delayed by party politics. Faced with overwhelming popular opposition to their complicity in

the Gaza genocide and attacks on democracy, Labour and the Tories must work together towards their common aim. They can then present the electorate in an upcoming national vote with a fait accompli, with both parties committed to upholding the new definition and any new legislation which flows from it.

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has already extended a hand of friendship. Within hours of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak denouncing millions of anti-war protesters as "extremists", and calling a democratically elected MP, a threat to democracy, Starmer leapt to his Tory opposite number's defence. Sunak had been "right to advocate unity and to condemn the unacceptable and intimidatory behaviour we have seen recently... This is something agreed across the parties and which we should defend."

He said this even as Sunak's advisers were rushing to redact the most obviously dictatorial elements of his speech from the official transcript.

In its response to Sunak's speech, the Socialist Equality Party wrote that "a government which organises a state crackdown to defend a criminal policy it pursues against the overwhelming majority of the population has no legitimacy," and demanded an immediate general election, in which the SEP would fight to build an anti-war, socialist opposition to both the Tory and Labour parties.

This demand must be taken up and fought for by the working class as a way of breaking through the conspiracy being hatched in parliament against democratic rights and in aid of an unimpeded Israeli genocide in Gaza.



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