

UK's new “extremism” definition is a major assault on democratic rights

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In a fundamental attack on democratic rights, the British government announced its new definition of “extremism” Thursday. It marks a new stage in the criminalisation of protest and free speech.

The definition was announced in Parliament by Communities Secretary Michael Gove, who made clear that the intention was to make oppositional thought a criminal offence.

Claiming that “our democracy and values of inclusivity and tolerance are under challenge from extremist groups,” he complained that “Most extremist materials and activities are not illegal and do not meet the terrorism or the national security threshold.

“The proposed definition will hold that extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance that aims to: negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; undermine, overturn or replace the UK’s system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve those results.”

The full definition is available on the governments’ website here.

Extremism was first defined by the government in 2011, said Gove. But his department “is publishing an updated, more precise and rigorous definition of extremism” and a set of “cross-Government engagement principles” and “setting up a new counter-extremism centre of excellence.”

The “centre of excellence” is a massive Whitehall-based spying operation to be run by a group of unnamed government officials tasked with gathering intelligence and identifying “extremist” groups and individuals. Its written mission statement asserts that it “is not intended to capture, for example, political parties that aim to alter the UK’s constitutional makeup through democratic means, or protest groups which at times may cross into disruption

but do not threaten our fundamental rights, freedoms, or democracy itself.”

Yet, in the same section, it adds that “Extremists can be individuals, groups or organisations, where there is evidence of behaviour conducted to further any of the three aims set out in the definition” and that “The examples of behaviour above are indicative and not exhaustive; we must have the flexibility to reflect the changing nature of how extremists operate in the UK over time.”

Gove announced that the first groups to be considered extremist are already under investigation. He named two far-right groups, the British National Socialist Movement and Patriotic Alternative, as well as the Muslim Association of Britain, CAGE-UK and Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), which “give rise to concern for their Islamist orientation and beliefs. We will be holding these and other organisations to account to assess if they meet our definition of extremism and will take action as appropriate.”

More organisations were listed in Gove’s draft speech, including Friends of al-Aqsa and 5Pillars, described as “divisive forces within Muslim communities”, and the far-right group Britain First.

Groups designated as extremist are only allowed to seek a reassessment and submit new evidence to a review. The sole avenue after that is taking out a judicial review in the courts at a prohibitive cost.

Making clear the ability to widen the definition to encompass left-wing political tendencies, the written mission statement explains that “Behaviour that could constitute extremism” is “Advocating that the UK’s parliamentary democracy and democratic values and rights are not compatible with their ideology, and seeking to challenge, overthrow, or change our political system outside of lawful means.”

This is the criminalisation of opinion and thought, rather

than actions taken.

The government press release seeks to play down the vast implications of the definition for free speech and the right to protest, stating, “This definition is not statutory and has no effect on the existing criminal law—it applies to the operations of Government itself.

“It is not about silencing those with private and peaceful beliefs – not will it affect free speech, which will always be protected. It does not create new powers, it instead helps the government and our partners better to identify extremist organisations, individuals and behaviours.”

The fact is that over the last decade, there has been a widening attack on fundamental democratic rights, with key pieces of legislation enacted laying the basis for the police state now in operation. In addition, the press release notes that the new definition is just “the first in a series of measures to tackle extremism and protect our democracy.”

With the new definition and new Counter-Extremism Centre of Excellence enforcement unit, what is being established is the British version of Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz).

In 2017, the Verfassungsschutz classified the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party—SGP), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, as a “left-wing extremist” organisation. In the years since it has maintained this designation. The SGP, as a result, has been placed under state surveillance.

The Tories had been assured of the backing of the opposition Labour Party long ago. Even prior to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s extraordinary attack on the right to protest, following the election of George Galloway on an anti-war, pro-Palestinian ticket in the Rochdale by-election, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer was matching Sunak in branding anti-war protests as “extremist” and accusing them of fuelling antisemitism.

Labour’s Shadow Security Minister Dan Jarvis had demanded of his Tory counterpart on February 29: “Recent protests, alongside threats to and intimidation of politicians, have also raised the issue of what is defined as hateful extremism. The government have not yet brought forward a definition, but that would be helpful in countering threats and intimidation.”

He asked, “Can the Minister say when the government... will bring forward a definition, and outline when the Government will bring forward an updated counter-extremism strategy?”

Within two weeks the definition has been delivered.

For all the talk about protecting Britain’s pristine democracy, only a few dozen MPs out of 650 could be bothered to attend to hear Gove’s statement.

Speaking on behalf of Labour in response to Gove was Shadow Communities Secretary and deputy party leader Angela Rayner. Her response was centred on her questioning “why has it taken the Government 13 years to address this?” and demanding, given that Labour is expected to win the next general election, a “new cross-Government counter-extremism strategy, given that the last one is now nine years out of date.”

Rayner responded like a nodding dog to Gove’s responses, including thanking her for the “constructive, detailed and consensual approach that she is taking”.

Noting that Rayner “asked how the centre of excellence will be staffed and funded,” Gove responded “we will work with the existing expertise in the homeland security analysis and intelligence unit within the Home Office.”

Gove said of her question as to “why the Government or arms of the state have unwittingly engaged with extremist organisations” in the past: “Although the previous definition of extremism was well intentioned and drawn up with care, it was perhaps insufficiently precise and insufficiently policed, so we thought it was appropriate to update it.”

The working class must oppose this right-wing extremist cross-party agenda root and branch. The labelling and ultimately banning of groups branded as extremists represents a further massive erosion of democratic rights, which cannot stand. Beginning with the demonisation of Muslims, and despite throwing in a few fascist outfits, the real target is that which the ruling elite fear most of all—a left-wing, anti-war movement of millions as the working class fights back against war and austerity.



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