

UK Labour government rams through authoritarian National Security Bill

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The Labour government's National Security (State Threats) Bill passed all its stages in the House of Commons on July 6, becoming law two days later. It represents one of the most far-reaching attacks on democratic rights and press freedom in modern British history.

The Bill is a weapon against political protest, journalism and humanitarian work, and gives the state the means to prosecute those who oppose its wars. Its purpose is to intimidate and suppress political dissent and critical journalism by depicting this as a threat to national security.

The Commons passed the Bill unopposed after agreeing to six amendments proposed by the House of Lords supposedly meant to safeguard against its extraordinary attacks on press freedoms and the activities of NGOs, without addressing the equally chilling impact on anti-war and anti-genocide protests.

Security Minister Angela Eagle spun the government's false narrative that it was aimed at tackling threats "predominantly, though not exclusively, from three countries: Russia, China and Iran".

The Bill's preamble stated it was to make "provision for the designation of bodies involved in foreign power threat activity; to create offences relating to bodies designated under this Act; and for connected purposes." The list of "bodies" designated as "involved in foreign power threat activity" can be extended almost at will by the Home Secretary.

Clause 2 of the National Security (State Threats) Bill inserts new sections 17A–17C into the National Security Act 2023, creating offences of supporting a designated body (s.17A), assisting a designated body (s.17B), and obtaining material benefits from a designated body (s.17C). From the moment a body is designated, any person deemed to "support," "assist" or "obtain material benefits" from it faces up to 14 years in prison per offence.

To "obtain material benefits" can include even receiving information. Assisting a designated body is an offence "if the person—(a) engages in conduct of any kind, and (b) intends that conduct to materially assist a designated body in carrying out UK-related activities." Such conduct "includes providing, or providing access to, information, goods, services or financial benefits (whether directly or indirectly)."

The legal checks placed on the sweeping power are so limited as to be worthless, with barely any oversight even by Parliament's intelligence committee and bypassing the judiciary altogether, leaving the courts only with the power to review actions, not

authorise them.

The legislation is the state's answer to growing anti-war sentiment.

Over the past two years—as part of a mass movement internationally—more than 30 mass anti-war demonstrations have mobilised in London, and many more in other cities across Britain, opposing the complicity of successive Conservative and Labour governments in Israel's genocide in Gaza. The marches have been routinely condemned by senior Tory and Labour figures as "hate marches" and "antisemitic".

The speed with which the measure was forced through is confirmation of the break with democratic norms in ruling circles. The legislation completed its entire passage—from its official announcement in the King's Speech on May 13 to becoming law—in less than two months.

Such was the frenzy of the government to get it through that the Bill cleared every one of its Commons stages in just a single day—on June 17—including its second reading, committee and report stages and third reading. A "guillotine" procedure was deployed to limit debate to just six hours, ensuring that legislation carrying 14-year sentences received a fraction of the scrutiny given to routine measures.

The Bill expands a battery of existing repressive legislation, primarily the National Security Act 2023, and operates in tandem with the Crime and Policing Act 2026; it incorporates the draconian Section 12 provisions of the Terrorism Act 2000 already wielded against journalists and demonstrators.

Large parts of the Crime and Policing Act came into force on June 29, and the list of protest actions now criminalised is staggering. Climbing on any of two dozen specified memorials can now bring three months in jail under the Act's new Schedule 17 offence. Protesting outside the home of any elected official or candidate now attracts up to six months' imprisonment.

Separately, under the National Security Act 2023, many sites across the country are designated "prohibited places," where unauthorised entry, approach, or even photography can carry a six-month sentence—rising to 14 years if prosecutors allege a purpose prejudicial to the "safety or interests of the United Kingdom."

These are not confined to military bases and nuclear installations. A January 2024 Ministry of Defence notice—unearthed by Campaign Against the Arms Trade three months later—confirmed that any UK land or building used by a defence supplier in the invention, development, production, or

storage of weapons for the armed forces is by default a prohibited place. The Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit's Bristol offices, a longstanding target of anti-arms-trade protests, were subsequently marked with National Security Act warning signage.

It is also now an offence to conceal one's identity—including with a face mask, even by using medical masks—in a designated area controlled by police restrictions, punishable by up to a month's imprisonment. Possessing a flare or firework on a demonstration carries a £1,000 fine.

Police are placed under a new duty to weigh the "cumulative disruption" of separate protests in the same area, expressly targeting demonstrations organised by the anti-war movement, and are handed fresh powers around places of worship. Other state bodies, the British Transport Police and Ministry of Defence Police, can also impose conditions.

More than 3,300 peaceful activists have already been arrested over the past year for opposing the ban on Palestine Action, and the government's intention is the proscribing of more organisations. The new laws provide the means to make such bans routine—stripping away even the limited judicial hurdles that formal proscriptions previously had to clear.

It is already expected that the government will designate various state-linked organisations, including Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a threat to national security. These bans will be used in turn to facilitate mass domestic repression.

As with the Palestine Action proscription, anybody alleged to have expressed support for a designated group commits an offence. Even those who host meetings, attend a meeting or arrange a meeting in which a person makes a statement allegedly in support of that proscribed group or, even more spuriously, does anything deemed to advance the causes of that proscribed group commit an offence—carrying jail sentences of between 10 and 14 years.

Throughout the Bill's passage, the government ignored every protest and legal objection raised. The Society of Editors called for explicit statutory protection for public-interest journalism. Index on Censorship, *Tribune* and *The Guardian* warned that vague drafting around "material benefits" would result in self-censorship and endanger reporters working from Iran, Lebanon and Palestine.

Human rights groups warned that the National Security Act 2023 "prohibited places" regime could risk disproportionately interfering with Article 10 (freedom of expression) and Article 11 (freedom of assembly) of the European Convention on Human Rights—creating a "chilling effect" on lawful dissent.

Bond, the UK's NGO network, and the International Development Committee protested that under the National Security (State Threats) Bill, humanitarian workers could be forced to prove their innocence in conflict zones.

All of it was brushed aside by the government, with the Lords' amendments providing no statutory protections in law to journalists and NGOs.

The relevant amendment from the Lords—backed this week by the Commons to pass the legislation—added a defence "for the purpose of carrying out humanitarian activities" regarding the offence of assisting a designated body. Among the five other amendments accepted, the words "journalism", "journalist", or

"journalistic activity" were not mentioned.

The Lords Amendment 3 instead inserted into the material benefits offence only that it "is a defence to show that the person had a reasonable excuse for obtaining, accepting or agreeing to accept the information." But this "defence" is confined to information specifically, not to financial or other material benefits, and even then requires the accused to justify their conduct once charged.

Security Minister Eagle had no qualms about accepting the amendments, declaring them as only "belt and braces, nothing has changed."

The Bill went through with the backing of the Tories and Liberal Democrats. The "opposition" to the Bill by the 85 who voted down the main amendment was mostly from Tories who argued that putting a specific humanitarian defence into the statute could make it harder to prosecute organisations or individuals acting on behalf of "hostile" states while claiming a humanitarian purpose.

While the Green Party opposed specific sections of the Bill, asking during the single June debate if a proposed new section would "limit access to justice, or prevent challenges through the courts to future decisions made under human rights principles," they tabled no amendments seeking to reject the Bill outright. Four of the party's five MPs voted in favour of the main Lords amendment, which allowed the entire draconian Bill to be enacted as law; the fifth, recently elected Hannah Spencer, did not record a vote.

This week's final vote laid bare the spinelessness of the few dozen Labour MPs who call themselves "left." Not once, at any stage, did those in Labour's Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) caucus vote No to the Bill in its entirety. Instead, they confined themselves to abstentions on the final vote and making a few critical comments posted on social media.

The SCG's main concern was to avoid losing the whip, and to retain their cosy political careers. When the House of Lords amendments were returned, the "left" accepted these as good coin—notwithstanding the warnings from human rights groups that the executive's dictatorial powers remained wholly intact and that the promised protections for NGOs and journalists amounted to hollow "defences" rather than strict legal exemptions.

The rotten Labour Party which rammed the legislation through will shortly be led by Andy Burnham, who has not uttered a single word on this major offensive against democratic rights. His silence is the consent of someone who will continue backing British imperialism's wars and global aggression and intensify the offensive against the working class.



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