

The criminalisation of political dissent in Britain

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“From foul deeds endless tragedy arises,” the World Socialist Web Site wrote, commenting on the state execution of innocent Brazilian worker, Jean Charles de Menezes, by plainclothes policemen on a London subway train on July 22, 2005.

Events have tragically confirmed that warning. In the years since Menezes’ killing, for which no one has ever been held to account, the legal framework of a police state has been enacted in Britain.

The implications of this have been made clear over the last weeks.

Since the start of April, some 300 people have been arrested and detained in just three police operations. The vast majority of these were rounded up in two of these operations, both focusing on a supposed threat to “public order”.

Maintaining public order is now a pseudonym for the criminalising of political dissent.

Even before the G20 summit of world leaders began in London, five people were arrested in Plymouth under the Terrorism Act, reportedly accused of possessing “material relating to political ideology”.

All were released without charge, but the fact that political activism is considered a criminal offence in 21st century Britain was subsequently writ large on the streets of the capital.

Beginning April 1, a massive police operation was set in place around the G20 summit. Hundreds of people, legally exercising their right to protest, were “kettled”—forcibly held behind police cordons for up to seven hours—in the side streets of central London.

It was behind one of these cordons that Ian Tomlinson—attempting to make his way home after work—was attacked from behind by a baton-wielding masked police officer. He died moments later.

Eyewitness accounts, video footage and photo stills provide conclusive proof that the police’s attack against Tomlinson was par for the course during the protests.

The police actions had nothing to do with ensuring “public safety”. If anything, they constituted a deliberate attempt to provoke disorder as the pretext for further repression. This is underscored by evidence of plain-clothes officers armed with batons striking out at demonstrators, as well as the participation of the Territorial Support Group—a special quasi-paramilitary police unit which was involved in several of the most publicised incidents, and whose identification numbers were concealed.

Downloads of film footage of the police in action at the G20 protests is said to be particularly high in Brazil—Menezes' birthplace, and a country bitterly familiar with police savagery against political dissidents.

For good reason, the government attempted to ensure that its "public order" policy would not see the light of day. While police now routinely photograph and demand the identification and addresses of people taking part in lawful demonstrations, watching the watchers is illegal in New Labour's Orwellian dystopia.

Less than one month before the protests, section 76 of the Counter-Terrorism Act 2008 came into force, providing for the arrest and imprisonment of anyone taking photographs of police officers.

In one instance during the G20 protests, recorded on camera, police officers instructed photographers and news crews to leave the vicinity within 30 minutes or face arrest.

This in a country whose population is now one of the most heavily surveilled in the world. The UK has the greatest concentration of closed circuit TV cameras per head of population. Moreover, without any parliamentary debate let alone public consent, recent legislation has compelled all Internet service providers to retain data from emails and website visits for up to one year. Details of phone calls and text messages can be similarly stored, and made available to the government and other official agencies.

As if such powers were not enough for police to be aware of the movements of any potentially "significant" individuals, on April 13, police in Nottingham carried out the unprecedented "pre-emptive" arrests of 114 people. No crime had been committed. The arrests were made purely on the basis that the police "suspected" a plan by environmentalists to target a power station in Nottingham. While no charges have as yet been made, the arrests were used to mount a trawling operation, raiding homes and seizing personal papers and computers.

In between the London and Nottingham operations, police in the north-west of England mounted major "anti-terror" raids, involving dozens of armed officers. Twelve men, mainly foreign students, were detained as part of what was claimed to be an operation against an imminent terrorist attack.

Once again no charges have been made. Under British anti-terror laws, suspects can be held for 28 days without charge. It is widely reported that no evidence has so far been recovered to substantiate claims of a terrorist emergency.

All the recent police operations are predicated on the more than 200 pieces of separate anti-terror legislation enacted by the Labour government over the last years, and consolidated in the Terrorism Act 2006 which criminalises the mere expression of opinion deemed unacceptable by the Home Secretary.

At the time, then Prime Minister Tony Blair defended the measures on the grounds that political exigencies meant the "rules of the game" had changed.

This established a new legal principle—guilty on the say-so of the powers-that-be. The "rules" now in operation are those where armed police swoops and the targeting of political dissent is a matter of routine. In February this year, in a move which received barely any coverage, the Association of Chief Police Officers set up the Confidential Intelligence Unit,

targeted at “domestic extremists”. Assuming the “counter-subversion” functions usually conducted by MI5, the CIU is dedicated to the surveillance of radical groups, including placing informers amongst their numbers.

The assault on civil liberties is not specific to Britain. It is a tendency evidenced throughout the so-called “advanced democracies”. Indeed proclamations of “democracy” increasingly function as a thin veneer, behind which the state has abrogated to itself near autocratic powers.

That this finds no principled opposition from within the ruling establishment or its liberal “critics” must serve as a warning.

The essential driving force behind the adoption of such dictatorial methods is not the maintenance of “public order”, but the need to defend the existing order, preserving the wealth and power of a privileged few at the expense of working people under conditions of the greatest breakdown in the world capitalist economy since the 1930s.

The defence of democratic rights requires breaking the monopoly of the financial oligarchy and its representatives over political life. This can only be achieved through the independent initiative of the working class, fighting for the reorganisation of society on a socialist basis.

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