

UK Government Counter-Terrorism Bill Would Criminalize Speech, Political Activity

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The Conservative government in Britain is preparing to enact new legislation that, under the guise of the “war on terror,” will vastly expand police-state powers and essentially criminalize speech and other political activity.

Presented officially as an anti-terrorism bill, the proposed measures will be targeted at any popular opposition to the government’s policies of aggressive militarism abroad and austerity measures in Britain.

Following his party’s victory in the May 7 general election, Prime Minister David Cameron announced the proposal at last week’s National Security Council (NSC) meeting. The meeting, chaired by Cameron, brings together leading government officials with the heads of Britain’s security agencies.

The new bill will include a series of measures targeting groups and individuals deemed by the government to be “extremist.” This term is defined so vaguely as to encompass a wide array of political activity.

The new bill will create extremist “disruption orders” for individuals and “banning orders” for groups. The targets for these new police powers will be those who have conducted “harmful” behaviour.

According to the *Guardian*, the “harmful” behaviour covers activities that pose “a risk of public disorder, a risk of harassment, alarm or distress or creating a ‘threat to the functioning of democracy’.”

This will be used to criminalise campaigns critical of government policy and protests, which are frequently dispersed by the police on precisely the grounds that they disrupt public order. The language also indicates that the government would have the authority to target those merely planning such activity prior to it taking place.

Extremist disruption orders will permit the government to take action against individuals considered to have engaged in such harmful behaviour, or whom the government claims have attempted to “radicalise” youth.

The orders contain bans on individuals broadcasting their views on television, and anyone subject to an order will be compelled to submit any written publication, including social media posts, to the police before it is printed. In addition, the orders will make it illegal for

individuals to attend or address public gatherings or protests.

Ofcom, the broadcast regulator, is to be given powers to move against channels judged to be broadcasting “extremist” material. The charity commission will be able to take action against charities that “fund terrorism.”

Banning orders will allow the government to outlaw “extremist” organisations. If such a move is taken, anyone found to be a member of the organisation will be guilty of a criminal offence. Authorities will also be able to shut down premises used by groups to promote “extremism.”

Human rights group Privacy International branded the new proposal as an “assault on the rights of ordinary British citizens.”

Islamist groups will not be the main focus of the new law. As the *Guardian*’s home affairs editor wrote in an analysis of the proposal, “the official definition of non-violent extremism is already wide-ranging and, as Big Brother Watch has pointed out, the national extremism database already includes the names of people who have done little more than organise meetings on environmental issues.”

The requirement that the government apply to the courts to obtain such orders will do little to prevent their abuse. The government has repeatedly invoked national security considerations to present evidence to the courts in secret. It even intended to hold an entire terrorism trial in secret last year before abandoning it at the last minute. The declaration of a national security threat would thus permit government claims about an individual or group to go unchallenged in the courts by an independent lawyer, since the only individuals allowed access to such information are government-appointed legal representatives.

Together with a sweeping attack on democratic rights and legal norms, the Conservatives’ anti-terror bill will further advance the government’s right-wing agenda of whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment. New powers will be established to deny immigrants entry on the grounds of preaching extremist views.

Cameron’s proposals make clear that the Conservatives are determined to vastly expand the repressive powers of the state, including by reintroducing the controversial “snooper’s charter” which would grant intelligence agencies the power to conduct mass surveillance and store data from emails and other internet data from social networking sites and messaging services. It will also allow authorities to access encrypted messages.

Cameron claimed that the UK has been a “‘passively tolerant society’ for too long, saying to our citizens: as long as you obey the law, we will leave you alone.”

This extraordinary declaration is a backhanded acknowledgement that those who Cameron intends to target with the new law have committed no crime under the existing legal system.

“This government will conclusively turn the page on this failed approach. As the party of one nation, we will govern as one nation and bring our country together. That means actively promoting certain values. Freedom of speech. Freedom of worship. Democracy. The rule of law. Equal rights regardless of race, gender or sexuality,” Cameron proclaimed.

Cameron's reference to "one nation" were especially sinister. It suggests that anyone challenging the political interests of the British ruling class and championing the rights and interests of the working class will be targeted for surveillance and repression.

The "values" Cameron talks about promoting are precisely those that have been used by successive governments to wage aggressive wars abroad to uphold British imperialist interests, and carry through an assault on social and democratic rights at home.

These policies have seen British imperialism, alongside American imperialism, aligned with some of the very Islamist forces it now seeks to present as the greatest threat to the country. In the 2011 regime change operation in Libya, Britain participated in the NATO bombing campaign that toppled the Gaddafi regime, while supplying weapons to Islamist groups in the country. Many of these groups had ties to Al Qaida and later moved to Syria with CIA support, where some elements came together to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The assertion that Britain has been "passively tolerant" for too long is a lie. The entire political establishment, including the opposition Labour Party, has been complicit in erecting the framework of a police state in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the London bombings in 2005.

The Labour government under Tony Blair brought forward "anti-terror" measures in 2001 that included wide-ranging police powers to detain suspects for crimes committed under an expanded definition of terrorism. In 2006, a further law allowed the prosecution of those "encouraging" terrorism, which saw individuals put on trial purely for making statements or posting videos online that had no connection to a specific terrorist attack.

However, the push to go even further has been growing for some time. In the wake of the attacks on the offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* earlier this year, political figures and intelligence operatives criticised Britain's anti-terror laws for not doing enough to monitor the Internet.

The planned actions in the UK are part of an escalating international assault on democratic rights. Earlier this month, the French National Assembly passed legislation sanctioning mass spying and other police state measures. Also this month, the Canadian House of Commons passed the "Anti-Terror Act," which gave the state vast new powers, including the ability to target any activities declared a danger to "national security."

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