

# Britain: Parliament approves police state measures in Terrorism Bill

By by Socialist Equality Party (Britain)  
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The Labour Party government of Prime Minister Tony Blair has succeeded in reinstating an offence of “glorifying terrorism” in its latest Terrorism Bill. On February 15, Parliament rejected amendments to the clause proposed by the Lords, and the government won by a comfortable majority after the collapse of a supposed Labour rebellion.

The Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives were joined by just 17 Labour backbenchers in voting against the measure—10 fewer than when the bill was previously debated. A few Labourites abstained, leaving the government with a majority of 38.

Overtaking another Lords amendment, members of Parliament (MPs) voted that police will not require a warrant from a judge to force internet service providers to remove material deemed to glorify terrorism from web sites. Electronic surveillance by the police and security services is expected to be stepped up immediately.

The bill will return to the House of Lords, but the Home Office has warned peers that opposition to the “glorification” clause must end. A spokesman said, “The Commons has now made its point twice on this subject.”

Home Secretary Charles Clarke made clear that the new bill will be rushed through and will be in operation by summer at the latest. Islamist groups who are deemed to have glorified terrorism will be banned, with Hizbut-Tahrir, al-Muhajiroun and a breakaway group from that organisation, al-Ghurabaa, already named as targets. The legislation provides for successor groups to those found guilty to be banned.

The “glorification” clause is inherently undemocratic. Its vagueness provides for the potential criminalisation of a vast range of political and even religious views. There exists no definition of the term “glorification.” But the government rejected all warnings to this effect, with Clarke declaring that the term was widely understood by the public and the courts. “Those who seek to recruit terrorists know what it means,” he said.

In his own presentation to Parliament, Clarke argued that amongst the statements that might be criminalised was the claim that “terrorists go straight to paradise when they die.” A belief that martyrs go to paradise is a basic tenet of Islam, and the criminalisation of statements to this effect could be used to

arbitrarily target Muslim opponents of the government’s policies.

The threat to civil liberties and the danger of widespread repression were underscored by the government’s citing of a small protest organised by Islamic fundamentalist groups against the anti-Muslim cartoons. Blair utilised the presence of placards praising terrorist atrocities such as 9/11 and the July 7 London bombings to argue that “the important thing is that the type of demonstrations that we saw a couple of weeks ago, where I think there were placards and images that people in this country felt were totally offensive, the law will allow us to deal with those people and say, ‘Look, we have free speech in this country but don’t abuse it.’”

Blair’s argument is bogus. Action can already be taken against such statements under laws against incitement to violence. Moreover, around the world, tens of thousands of Muslims have protested against the publication of the cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist. All that would be required to mount a state attack on such protests in Britain would be to target any placards or banners deemed to flout the new legislation. These could easily be placed in the crowd by provocateurs.

The legislation contributes to poisoning the political climate and whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment.

Even if this clause had not been accepted, however, the Terrorism Bill would remain the most draconian attack on civil liberties in British history.

Parliament has agreed to what amounts to the legislative framework for a police state.

Amongst the measures that will shortly go on the statute books is the extension of the period in which police can hold a person suspected of terrorist offences without charge from 14 to 28 days.

This is in breach of the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights, and flouts Habeas Corpus, which prohibits arbitrary detention by the state.

The bill not only outlaws the glorification of terrorism, but also incitement to terrorism and acts preparatory to terrorism. Precisely what any of these clauses mean has never been clarified.

It builds on 200 pieces of anti-terror legislation that have

already been enacted, including the 2001 Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act, which introduced the indefinite detention of foreign nationals, and the 2005 Prevention of Terrorism Act, which gave the home secretary the power to impose “control orders,”—i.e., house arrests—on British citizens and foreign nationals.

The debate in Parliament demonstrated the absence of any significant opposition to such fundamental attacks on democratic rights. Just two days before, Parliament voted to introduce compulsory identity cards.

The only measures contained in the bill that were rejected by the opposition were the initial proposal to allow 90 days’ detention without trial and the “glorification” clause.

Opposition to 90 days’ detention was silenced by the government agreeing to reduce the period to one month—which was still double the previous time permissible in law. The argument of the Conservatives and the House of Lords against the government’s “glorification” clause centred only on the difficulty of legally interpreting the term.

Their counterproposal was to criminalise “indirect encouragement” of terrorism, which was defined as a statement “describing terrorism in such a way that a listener would infer that he should emulate it.” The Tories stressed that on this basis a compromise could be reached.

When Clarke objected that the reference to “listener” would mean that written statements on placards and web sites would escape prosecution, Shadow Home Secretary Dominic Grieve said that the amendment could be reworded to cover these cases.

After the vote, the government boasted that it had mounted a show of strength. Blair, crowing that his government had won the argument, only succeeded in unintentionally illustrating the bill’s anti-democratic character when he emphasised that those “condoning people who engage in terrorism” will be prosecuted or expelled from the country.

The prime minister is not merely defining the term “glorification,” but substituting an even more all-embracing category.

He is able to assume such an arrogant posture because he was faced with only a pathetic terminological opposition from the Tories and the Lords and—above all—because of the cowardice of his supposed opponents within the Parliamentary Labour Party.

It is this lack of any principled opposition that has been demonstrated over the past week in a series of votes that the government was able to win comfortably. This is despite widespread and growing public hostility to Blair’s pro-business and anti-democratic agenda.

Labour has no popular mandate for its legislative programme. It was re-elected in May 2005 with the support of just 20 percent of the electorate after continuously losing support since coming to power in 1997. Millions protested against its war-mongering in Iraq. This opposition finds only the faintest

echo in the parliamentary process.

Just last week, Labour suffered a massive by-election defeat in its formerly safe Scottish seat, Dunfermline and West Fife. The beneficiaries of the anti-Labour sentiment were the Liberal Democrats, who captured the seat with a 16 percent swing, and the Scottish National Party. Both have taken positions against the Iraq war and the terror legislation, but have no intention of mobilising popular opposition to the government.

It is only through a mass movement of the working class in defence of democratic rights and social conditions that the attacks of the government can be defeated.

Blair has again and again made clear that he is indifferent to public opinion. He is supported by his big business backers precisely because of his readiness to impose social attacks and engage in naked militarism in the face of popular hostility.

The past week has also made clear that even if Blair retired from office, Labour would continue to ruthlessly defend the interests of a financial oligarchy. Labour’s supposed left wing is a pathetic rump that has already shown it will reconcile itself to whatever the government does.

Its impotence and lack of principle are epitomised by the support it has given to Chancellor Gordon Brown and its efforts to portray him as an alternative to Blair. For his part, Brown has in recent days proclaimed himself to be Blair’s rightful heir. In an interview prior to the debate on the Terrorism Bill, he insisted that anti-terror legislation should be strengthened and argued for extending the 28-day detention provision.

Official politics has become the exclusive province of right-wing political parties, in which traditional distinctions have become virtually meaningless. The working class has no vehicle through which to make its interests felt.

This raises the central task of building a new and genuinely socialist party, which links the defence of democratic rights and opposition to militarism and colonialism with the fight for social equality through the abolition of the profit system. This means building the Socialist Equality Party as the mass party of the working class.

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