

Britain's Labour Party helps Conservative government pass Snoopers' Charter

By Trevor Johnson
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The Labour Party is playing an indispensable role in helping the Conservative government pass into law the Investigatory Powers Bill (IPB), designed to legalise government spying on millions of innocent people. The IPB is known, for good reason, as the Snoopers' Charter.

With virtually no media coverage, MPs in the House of Commons voted last week by 444 to 69 in favour of the bill. Most Labour MPs who had previously been critical of the bill voted in its favour, while the Scottish National Party (SNP) voted against. The bill is now set to be discussed in the House of Lords and is likely to come into effect in January 2017.

The IPB is a far-reaching attack on privacy and democratic rights, bringing together the current diverse rules governing state surveillance in a single piece of legislation.

It enshrines in law the previously hidden and illegal mass gathering of internet data by the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) spying agency, as exposed by US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013. Snowden was forced to become a hunted fugitive and seek asylum in Moscow after informing the world's population of the existence of massive state surveillance systems being operated by the US, UK and the other imperialist powers.

The bill goes even further than legalising the spying revealed by Snowden—giving the security services unprecedented new powers to track the web history of ordinary people. This will be achieved by compelling Internet Service Providers to keep internet connection records for a period of 12 months for access by the police and state security services. This will enable them to see every web site a person has visited, every comment made and every search term used. The IPB

will also allow the hacking of people's mobile phones as part of the government surveillance network, so that having a smartphone will be like "carrying around a bug with you" in the words of Ben Jaffey QC, lawyer for Privacy International (PI).

The introduction to the all-embracing bill states that its purpose is to: "Make provision about the interception of communications, equipment interference and the acquisition and retention of communications data, bulk personal datasets and other information; to make provision about the treatment of material held as a result of such interception, equipment interference or acquisition or retention... to make further provision about investigatory powers and national security..."

In the face of widespread opposition, the government relied on Labour to help make a few minor changes to ensure it passed unimpeded. Once Labour had suggested its changes—nearly all of which were rejected—it voted with the government in favour of one of the most widely hated laws since the passing of the bedroom tax. Labour's main concern was to ensure that state surveillance of the population could continue, but with full legal sanction. Labour's Keir Starmer stated only that, "[I]t is important that the powers being exercised are avowed, it's important they are placed on the statute".

The SNP while claiming to oppose the IPB, merely put forward a different set of proposed changes and then cast their votes against it—knowing it would still get passed into law by a significant majority.

The nominally liberal *Guardian*, hailed the government's "concessions" while minimizing the significance of the new powers.

The "concessions"—made to meet the concerns of parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee

(ISC), Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs and backbench critics within the Conservative Party itself – include protections for MPs and journalists, and the addition of a privacy clause that advises the use of new mass surveillance powers should not be authorised in situations “where less intrusive means could be used.” As with all matters affecting the interests of the elite, the decision on which method of surveillance to use will be made behind the scenes.

Former Conservative attorney general and Member of the Privy Council, Dominic Grieve, chairs the ISC. The former Labour cabinet minister Harriet Harman chairs parliament’s joint human rights committee. Both Grieve and Harman are tried and trusted guardians of the interests of the ruling class. Harman was part of the cabinet of former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The “penalties” against those who deliberately misuse the new powers will never be aimed at those acting on behalf of the ruling elite; otherwise many of those in charge of running the security services would be facing long prison sentences.

Just as the banks have been rewarded for their criminal activities that led to the global financial crash of 2008 by being given almost unlimited amounts of cash and cheap credit, the security and spying agencies are being rewarded for their criminality with new and almost unlimited powers.

The ruling elite throughout Europe are using the threat of terrorism to create a climate of fear, and push through draconian attacks on democratic rights to strengthen the state for use against the working class. The French government of Socialist Party President François Hollande has imposed a near-permanent state of emergency and placed tens of thousands of soldiers and gendarmes on the streets.

The passage of the IPB was carried out in the middle of the referendum campaign over the UK’s membership of the European Union. Labour, under new “left” leader Jeremy Corbyn, is backing the Tory government as part of the Remain campaign and will do nothing to destabilise the plans of the dominant sections of the ruling elite whose interests are bound up with EU membership.

The majority of the trade unions affiliated to the Trades Union Congress also support Remain and likewise did not utter a word of opposition as the Snoopers’ Charter passed. The media was largely

silent as well, with the referendum campaign utilised to “bury the bad news” of increased state surveillance.

A recent release by Privacy International (PI) of previously secret correspondence between the UK’s spying agencies, MI5, GCHQ and the Interception of Communications Commissioner reveals how they conspired to interpret existing laws as widely as possible to minimise any accountability.

PI states that “GCHQ and MI5 circumvented the will of Parliament by ignoring the specific powers that RIPA [Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000] gave them and the safeguards that RIPA provided against accessing of our personal data. Instead they used the vague powers in The Telecommunications Act 1984—which provide minimal safeguards and were never intended to be used for the purposes of bulk communications data acquisition.”

This misuse of previous laws shows that the “concessions” claimed by Labour are not worth the paper they are written on.

Those who criticise the IPB mainly on questions of “oversight” (or the lack of it), however, miss the fundamental point—that the state machine as a whole is being strengthened for use against the working class. The level of inequality in society is such that it is no longer possible to sustain even the pretence of democracy. This cannot be resolved by putting one part of the state machine under the “oversight” of another part.

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