

UK election dominated by growing threat of state repression

By Chris Marsden
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The most significant comment of the UK general election was made by Prime Minister Theresa May Tuesday. Declaring her four-point plan to clamp down on terrorism, she promised, “If our human rights laws stop us from doing it, we will change the laws so we can do it.”

This threat goes beyond even the reactionary implications of the anti-terror agenda she outlined. These measures include ending “safe spaces” on the Internet by censorship and forcing ISPs to facilitate mass state surveillance by abandoning end-to-end encryption. They also target what May called the “real world”—especially the public sector, where teachers, doctors and other professionals will be transformed into a network of informers to police both “extremist” thought and any movement designated as such by the state.

Martha Spurrier, the director of Liberty, said of May’s statement, “What she means is this: If the right to liberty or to a fair trial or not to be tortured gets in the way, she’ll just scrap them—casually disposing with values set down to stop tyranny after the horrors of the second world war.”

Most significant of all is the fact identified by the *Guardian* that tearing up human rights laws “would involve declaring a state of emergency.”

May’s Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Damian Green has said changes to human rights laws would involve “a derogation” from the European Convention on Human Rights. A European Court of Human Rights fact sheet stresses that “the right to derogate can be invoked only in time of war or other public emergency threatening the life of the nation.” The fact that the Tories plan to call a state of emergency was confirmed by Green, who cited France’s declaration following the November 2015

Paris terror attacks. These involved suicide bombings and mass shootings of 130 people at the Bataclan theatre.

The “exceptional measure” in France banning public assemblies or individuals from protests has since been renewed five times and overwhelmingly employed against the working class. A report by Amnesty International notes that between November 2015 and May 5, 2017, there were 155 decrees issued under the state of emergency prohibiting public assemblies and 639 preventing individuals from taking part in public assemblies. The vast majority targeted protests against reactionary labour law reforms and affected “hundreds of activists, environmentalists, and labour rights campaigners.” The report cited “unnecessary or excessive force” used against peaceful protesters “who did not appear to threaten public order”.

Massive numbers of armed police are a routine sight on the streets of Paris. Only this week, thousands were mobilised after a lone individual attacked police officers with a hammer and was shot. As a result of the attack, newly elected President Emmanuel Macron is able to employ law and order rhetoric to the full in the campaign for the legislative elections on June 11 and 18.

The parallels with Britain are both obvious and ominous.

The Tories have used the terrorist outrages in Manchester and London to shift the general election narrative onto charges that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is a “friend” of terrorism, an enemy of Britain and a threat to national security.

The hysterical tone was set by the government, with Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson declaring, “For 30 years he has been soft and muddle-headed on terror. He has been soft and muddle-headed on defence, he has

taken the side of just about every adversary this country's had in my lifetime."

This message was amplified by hysterical press coverage. The *Daily Mail* devotes 13 pages to attacks on Corbyn, Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell as "[a]pologists for terror... cosyng up to those who hate our country, while pouring scorn on the police and security services and opposing anti-terror legislation over and over and over again."

The *Sun* editorialised, "Your vote would be to install Britain's first Marxist government... It would be the gravest mistake this country has ever made. Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell have posed as calm and respectable to get elected. It is a gigantic fraud. They are bad men who have spent their lives in the company of truly evil people."

Corbyn has responded to a barrage of attacks on him by forfeiting every position he once declared to be a principle, without a murmur. He has pledged support for NATO, Trident nuclear weapons and additional funding for the army, MI5 and MI6. He said this week, "We will protect the people of this country from any threat that they face anywhere in the world. We will invest properly in our police service, we will invest properly in our armed services—the numbers in the armed services have gone down, the navy are crying out for more ships, the air force are crying out for more surveillance aircraft. We would fund them properly to achieve all of that."

Crucially Corbyn has focused all his attention since the Manchester suicide bombing on denunciations of May for cutting 20,000 police and pledging that Labour will provide 10,000 additional police. This is under conditions where his earlier statement—linking the terror threat to Britain's wars for regime change in Iraq, Libya and Syria—has been confirmed in a way that should have sealed the fate of the Tory government.

It has been proved beyond doubt that MI5 and the police had such intimate knowledge of and connections to Manchester suicide bomber Salman Abedi that he could have only acted as he did because he was a protected asset. In the past several days, it has now emerged that the police and secret services were similarly aware of the three terrorists who killed eight people in London.

The ringleader, Khuram Butt, had been reported to

the authorities on numerous occasions and was, last year, even the subject of a *Channel 4* documentary, "The Jihadis Next Door." Police said Monday that Butt had been under intense investigation in 2015, but this had been "dropped." Yesterday, however, "UK counter-terrorism sources" told CNN he was still "a figure in one of just 500 active counter-terrorism investigations..."

In March 2016, the 22-year-old Youssef Zaghba, 22, was arrested as he tried to travel to Syria from Italy and told the police, "I'm going to be a terrorist." His name was put on the Schengen Information System, which automatically warns other European nations if criminals are trying to enter the country. But when Zaghba arrived at Stansted airport in Britain this year, he was allowed through.

According to Irish security sources, Rachid Redouane was also known to police in the UK and was once "being observed." He was arrested in 2009 in Scotland, after trying to travel to Northern Ireland by ferry on a fake passport. He was refused asylum in Britain that year, but was granted a residence card following his marriage to an English woman in Ireland in 2012.

It is only thanks to Corbyn's self-censorship that May, who was home secretary and then prime minister throughout this period, can hope to pose as a defender of the public's safety. But the implications go beyond possibly gifting the Tories victory today.

Corbyn cannot and will not raise these issues because he is intent on heading a government that is acceptable to Britain's ruling class and trusted to protect its interests. But the net effect of his retreats and evasions is to miseducate, disarm and demobilise the millions of workers and youth who looked to him for leadership and to pave the way for a steeper descent into savage austerity, authoritarian forms of rule, militarism and war.

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