

# Tory legislation legalising war crimes by UK troops goes forward thanks to Labour Party

By Robert Stevens  
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Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer sacked three MPs from their front bench roles after they voted against the Johnson government's Overseas Operations Bill. The Bill is designed to protect British armed forces personnel who have committed war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan from prosecution and to protect those committing atrocities in future.

With the Tories majority of 80, the Bill easily passed its second reading Wednesday to go to its next stage. The Scottish National Party's 45 MPs and the Liberal Democrats nine voted against. The overwhelming majority of Labour's MPs abstained, as instructed by Starmer, with only 18 (8 percent of the parliamentary party) defying the whip and voting against. Beth Winter, Nadia Whittome and Olivia Blake were the three Parliamentary Private Secretaries, the most junior front-bench role, sacked for doing so.

The Bill means that the rule of law will not count when it comes to the actions of the armed forces abroad. It introduces a statutory presumption against prosecution, making it exceptional for personnel to be prosecuted five years or more after an incident. It also presages another breaching of international law, as it places a duty on the government to consider derogating from the European Convention on Human Rights in relation to large-scale overseas military operations.

The Bill is a flagship Tory policy, long mooted after a series of almost universally unsuccessful prosecutions taken out against members of the armed forces who committed war crimes in the years following the illegal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Starmer instructed an abstention on the Bill on the transparently false basis that it could be amended and made more palatable at a later stage. Backing the abstention, Labour's John Healey made the extraordinary statement, "We are dealing with *matters of torture, war crimes, MOD negligence, compensation for injured troops and compensation for the families who have lost their loved ones overseas. ... We on the Labour Benches will work with the Government to get the Bill right.*"

Labour has moved to the right of even sections of the military high command. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, General Sir Nick Parker, a former commander of British land forces, raised his opposition, "We shouldn't be treating our people as if they have special protection from prosecution. ... What we need to do is to investigate properly so that the ones who deserve to be prosecuted, are."

The sacked MPs were members of the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG), led by Starmer's predecessor Jeremy Corbyn and his ally John McDonnell. That this misnamed rump will never do anything to challenge the Labour right was underscored by the fact that nearly half, 16, of its meagre 34 MPs did not vote against a Bill that is a licence for soldiers to maim, torture and kill.

Starmer's role in backing the Bill is particularly venal. Only days earlier, he boasted in his keynote speech to Labour's online annual conference, referencing Prime Minister Boris Johnson's plan to ditch the Brexit treaty he agreed last year with the European Union, "We're all doing our bit to combat the virus by obeying the rule of six. Meanwhile the government won't even obey the rule of law."

Starmer also boasted that while Johnson, when employed as a journalist, "was being sacked by a newspaper for making up quotes, I was fighting for justice and the rule of law."

Starmer's real record is less exemplary. The legal career this multi-millionaire pursued was one in which he faithfully served the needs of the ruling elite. For this, he was rapidly elevated and accepted by the security services into the highest echelons of the British state, becoming director of public prosecutions in 2008. Under his direction, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) refused to prosecute MI5 and MI6 personnel in 2010, 2011 and 2012. Its agents were accused of participating in CIA extraordinary rendition programmes and the torture of detainees in Guantanamo Bay and Afghanistan.

Most infamously, in 2013 the CPS pressured Swedish prosecutors into maintaining a fraudulent investigation into

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, as a pretext for extraditing him and then shipping him off to the United States. Uncovered emails show Starmer's department writing to their Swedish counterparts, "Don't you dare get cold feet!"

Assange's show trial by his US and British persecutors for revealing their war crimes is the result of this dirty operation facilitated by Starmer. The Bill Starmer is helping steer onto the statute books to sanction future war crimes is testimony to why Number 10 and the White House are seeking to silence Assange forever.

Starmer's actions as Labour leader are no aberration. Labour is a party of state that has defended every crime of British imperialism for more than a century. So filthy is the record of Starmer and Corbyn's party that, introducing the Bill, Tory Defence Minister Ben Wallace was able to crow to the Labour benches that the legislation was required as "Much of the mess we are having to come and clean up today is because of your illegal wars."

It was the Blair Labour government, in alliance with his fellow war criminals in Washington, based on a pack of lies, that dragged Britain into illegal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that have cost over a million lives.

The political establishment are seeking to ensure that the criminal operations of the ruling elite are freed from the constraint of any democratic accountability, not just overseas but in the UK.

Yesterday, within 24 hours of the Overseas Operations Bill going forward, the government introduced its Covert Human Intelligence Sources (CHIS) Bill, which allows confidential informants working for MI5 and the police to break the law. The CHIS does not explicitly rule out any crimes, with human rights groups demanding amendments against government opposition.

Reprieve has called for an explicit prohibition on the authorisation of crimes such as torture, murder and sexual violence. Amnesty International wrote, "There is a grave danger that this Bill could end up providing informers and agents with a licence to kill."

The Bill's remit goes far beyond MI5. Public authorities authorised to use the Bill's powers include all intelligence agencies, the police, the Serious Fraud Office, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Home Office relating to immigration and border control.

The raft of new repressive legislation being enforced—in the land of Magna Carta—is of a piece with the move of the ruling elite internationally to dispense with democratic forms of rule. What is being finalised is the framework for a police state, much of which is already in place, to be used against the working class.

This week, using the resurgence of COVID-19 as

justification, Johnson announced a "greater police presence on our streets, and the option to draw on military support where required to free up the police."

Under the Emergency Coronavirus Act passed in March, without a parliamentary vote, 20,000 troops were put on standby to be mobilised during the pandemic, with threatened social unrest cited. This week, it was revealed that 1,500 soldiers from three battalions are ready to take to the streets with 12 hours' notice, "if armed police are overstretched."

In confronting the threat of dictatorial rule, the working class in Britain and internationally face a bitter enemy in Labour and its putrid "left." Starmer is working in a de facto coalition with Johnson in the name of the "national interest" during a pandemic. According to the Skwawkbox blog, Starmer's team told the right-wing *Guido Fawkes* website about the sackings before Whittome herself, who was being interviewed on TV, was told.

McDonnell and Corbyn, after spending five years betraying the mandate they were handed by hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters to drive out the Blairite right, have retreated to the comfort of Labour's backbenches. There, as they did for decades, they are once again safely opposing this or that directive of their right-wing party with token votes in opposition.

Yesterday, McDonnell tweeted that after the vote "it's important to note that deciding not to vote against the Bill would have been a serious Rubicon to cross for anyone concerned about human rights." McDonnell's political career path is littered with crossed Rubicons. While he and Corbyn led the party, they allowed a free vote on the Cameron Tory government's participation in bombing missions in Syria. With the help of the Blairites, this handed Cameron a majority and bombing started soon after.

Asked last month by Rupert Murdoch's *Times Radio* if Starmer is a "proud socialist," McDonnell replied that Starmer represented "21st-century socialism ... We're on the same page."

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