

Britain's "New Anti-Terror Drive": Dirty Intelligence and the Repeal of Civil Liberties

Foiling Liberty: Theresa May's Program

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You always know when the British Home Secretary comes clean about the number of "terror plots" that have been foiled that something ugly is waiting around the corner. The dossier of justification is just about to be thrown at civil liberties - we got the necessary runs on the board, the attitude seems to say: have you? Since April 2010, we are told that 753 people have been arrested on terrorism-related offences, with 212 charged and 148 successfully prosecuted.

"There have been attempts to conduct marauding 'Mumbai-style' gun attacks on our streets, blow up the London Stock Exchange, bring down airliners, assassinate a British ambassador and murder serving members of our armed forces." [1]

Papers make the announcement part of what seems like a charity experiment. "Speaking as part of a new anti-terror drive" sounds like a radio plea for subscriptions and donations. It is, however, serious fare. The Counter-Terrorism Bill which is entertaining members of Parliament this week is the most serious of all. While there is no visible sense that Britain, or any other country in Europe, the United States, or Australasia, is in any greater danger than at any time since September 11, 2001, May would let you to believe otherwise. Since she is pondering the immeasurable - how "likely" is an attack to take place? - we are essentially dealing with the legislation of the worst sort: that which covers probabilities.

In support of her contentions, she utilises the tea-leaf reading habits of such bodies as the JTAC - the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre - which decided in the northern summer to raise the threat level for international terrorism from "substantial" to "severe". Turn the knob just the right way, and the policy will seemingly follow.

Some of the measures already chart the ground for hypocrisy. At the very least, it leaves huge potholes for it. Ransoms, for instance, will be banned seeing how beneficial such proceeds have been for the ISIS war machine, though we know that governments will fork out when they believe the stakes matter. Internet service providers (ISPs) are obliged to retain information linking Internet Protocol (IP) addresses. They are also being put in a position where they will have to do more. Such errors of overstretch are typical to a mindset that sees threats of immeasurable harm that must be controlled by snipping the communications line.

Blame Facebook, for instance, if it doesn't make an effort to alert the security authorities

about the prospect of a domestic attack between the chatterers. It does not matter whether such attitudes are those of a hot air disposition, the crazed wishes of people baying for blood against a regime or an order. The Lee Rigby report from the Intelligence and Security Committee, examining the circumstances that led to the killing of Drummer Lee Rigby, ticked the social media organisation off for not doing enough when it was revealed that one of the killers, Michael Adebolajo, had expressed one such view.[2] Such indignation is the equivalent of scolding phone companies for not doing the dirty work of intelligence services.

May sees a fruit salad of threats to the British realm. ISIS is one, but add to that Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda and home grown fanciers of aspiring caliphate growers, and you have a minister keen to think the brandish the dangers as credible. Or so she suggests, mooting the point that the legislation “is not a knee-jerk response to a sudden perceived threat.” The problem with this, as with anti-terror legislation, is that it tends anticipate the hypothetical with the actual.

Perhaps she also sees Prime Minister David Cameron, and many of her colleagues, as bits of fluff in the making of hard hitting policy. As noted in a *Spectator* profile of her, “She doesn’t rate Cameron anymore. She did, but not many more.”[3] When a person is attempting to brush up their leadership credentials, everything is free game.

Such behaviour shows a synaptic blindness on handling the liberty of the subject by nibbling away at its provisions. While in Britain, outrage will still gather in stormy opposition to such proposals as the ID card, matters concerning data retention over a search history on the Internet will garner a murmur in comparison. More to the point, while the Coalition government is keenly promoting a heavy abridgment of those liberties, it was very happy to abolish the ID cards legislation as one of its first acts in 2010.

Forms of bureaucratic registration are merely aspects of a panacea, the whole solution to a markedly complex effort. But worse than panaceas, they tend to be placebos. Monitoring citizens like chickens in a pen doesn’t guarantee a better citizen. But it certainly assures suspicion and detachment from the political process. Commentary from such observers of the jerky security state such as Philip Johnston can laud the fact that ID cards are not a part of British political life yet offer little by way of criticism of the proposed legislation. Pieties about the British belief in balancing and trade-offs are resorted to. “That is why, despite Labour’s efforts 10 years ago, we can still walk down the street without being asked to produce our ID cards.”[4]

Perception is everything, and punishing people for perceptions is tantamount to detaining people for witchcraft and blasphemy. Much of this suggests how little the road travelled on security matters has been. The realm of hypotheticals remains an all too potent temptation.

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Notes

[1] <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-theresa-may-on-counter-terrorism>

[2] https://sites.google.com/a/independent.gov.uk/isc/files/20141125_ISC_Woolwich_Report%-28website%29.pdf?attredirects=1

[3] <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2014/11/theresa-may-a-big-beast-in-kitten-heels/>

[4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11250776/Can-Theresa-May--get-the-right-balance-between-liberty-and-security.html>

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