

U.K. Police State? Prime Minister May's Surveillance Bill Is Chilling, Human Rights Nightmare

By [Michelle Stanistreet](#)

Global Research, September 13, 2016

[Morning Star](#) 13 September 2016

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

When my union, the National Union of Journalists, has been campaigning about secret state surveillance it has often felt like we are boxing with shadows.

No member of the public is allowed to know the extent of the types of operations involved and no-one is able to access the policies that relate to whether or not journalists and trade unionists are being put under surveillance.

The government's response has been to draft the Investigatory Powers Bill, a new legal framework that specifies some of the state's power. The measures in the Bill include the ability to intercept and target electronic communications, including emails, social media and mobile phones; it also allows the state to collect general internet browsing records and to hack into computers.

The Bill can be summed up as a human rights nightmare, one that sends the wrong message to the rest of the world about how we operate.

It also means that as a society we are redefining the acceptable boundaries of what the state can do to its citizens without their knowledge or consent.

To give just one example — according to the Home Office, you might have bought your mobile phone and continue to pay the bill but the information it holds is not yours but your service provider's.

The Bill allows the state to compel your service provider to give them all your electronic information and they can get their hands on it secretly, without you ever knowing.

The Investigatory Powers Bill resurrects some of the proposals contained within the "Snoopers' Charter" that allow the security and intelligence services to grab large quantities of our personal information — regardless of whether or not the authorities suspect you have done something wrong.

In the last session of Parliament the NUJ created a new form of words that could be added into the draft legislation to ensure that journalists' sources and whistleblowers would, at least, be protected.

If journalists are not protected from state interference or if they are seen as conduits for information for the authorities then this will put journalists in danger. This is a direct attack on our democracy.

Our proposals to amend the Bill have achieved unprecedented levels of support —

politicians from every political party have backed our new legislative clause in the debates in the Lords and in the House of Commons.

We've also had support from the majority of privacy and human rights organisations in Britain, other trade unions and — almost uniquely — the media industry is united on this issue.

People should be able to come forward and speak in confidence to a journalist — to blow the whistle, for example, to prevent the abuse of children or the abuse of disabled people in care homes; or highlight the safety problems at a nuclear power station; or tell a journalist about abusive management practices in their workplace.

If people can't come forward and speak in confidence to a journalist because they know the state is snooping on them, we will all suffer.

This ill-thought-out, rushed-through Bill should not be used to override the existing protections for journalists established in British law using the flimsiest excuse that technology has changed over time.

We have been arguing robustly that the state should not have these powers to bypass the existing protections.

Yet the government is determined to push through the changes before the end of this year.

Now we have a new parliamentary term we've little hope that we can fundamentally change the Bill.

Theresa May has become the Prime Minister and the previous home office minister John Hayes MP has been replaced by Ben Wallace MP — who still hasn't replied to our correspondence.

The labour movement uniquely understands why this is so important. Trade unionists already know the state colluded with blacklisting, we know some of our members as well as political activists and justice campaigners have been wrongly put under surveillance, we know that unjustified state interference is a threat to us.

May's mass surveillance Bill goes further and raises fundamental questions about whether the powers specified in the Bill could be used to monitor and disrupt legitimate political or industrial protests.

The Bill is even more of a chilling read when it is considered alongside the new Trade Union Act.

Despite all the challenges, we remain committed to the fight — we hope you will join in.

Michelle Stanistreet is general secretary of the National Union of Journalists.

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Articles by: **Michelle Stanistreet**

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