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November 14, 2005

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## **Blair plan to lock up people without evidence for 90 days defeated**

**But what if the majority seek limitations in civil liberties?**

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The defeat of Blair's draconian idea of allowing the police to lock up people without evidence for 90 days was a good sign. It showed some backbone and an awareness that the police can and will abuse its power. Sadly, though, our MPs were not against the principle of internment as such and voted to increase the detention period to 28 days. This, two years after increasing the period from 7 to 14 days.

Ironically, Blair stated that "Terrorism that wants to destroy our way of life." Yet Blair, by wanting to effectively eliminate habeas corpus, is doing just that. Sadly, the MPs only blunted the drift towards a police state. While 28 days is better than 90, it is still the longest period for detention without charge in democratic nations. As such, the rebellion was not a major victory for civil liberties and

principle – unsurprising, for if the Tories were in office they would have argued the same line as Blair.

But even this revolt on details, not principle, was too much for some. The Sun, backers of these draconian measures, called the MPs “traitors” and incredibly noted that “the limit was slashed to just 28 days.” In reality, the limit was doubled not “slashed” and to trust the government and the police implicitly is naive to the extreme. But what do you expect of a paper which, to bolster its case, puts on its front page a victim of the 7/7 attacks who is totally opposed to Blair’s plan? So much for giving the victims a voice.

What was not mentioned that neither September 11<sup>th</sup> nor the 7<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> July 2005 attacks would have been prevented by allowing the police to hold people for 90 days without charge. All of those involved were not considered to be terrorist suspects nor were they under police or security service investigation before these attacks. As such, to use the 7/7 victims as the Sun did is deeply hypocritical, never mind ignoring those amongst them who opposed the policy.

But it seems ironic that Blair has now found the democratic spirit. He told ministers there was a “worrying gap between parts of Parliament and the reality of the terrorist threat and public opinion”. Yet he was not bothered by this when he wanted to invade Iraq. Where was the worry when MPs voted for war against the wishes of the majority? Back then, it was good leadership to ignore the public. And what of the other issues the public back but which Blair opposes, such as renationalising the railways or rejecting the creeping privatisation of the NHS? We know the answer — the views of the population only relevant when they coincide with his agenda.

The reality of the Iraq decision was to increase the terrorist threat and to ignore public opinion. And now Blair asserts that the issue “is doing the right thing to protect this country”! If so, he should have listened to his own advisors and concluded that invading Iraq would increase the terrorist threat here. Could it be that the 90-day bill was primarily developed to protect Blair from

the consequences of that disastrous decision? One thing is sure, while he implies that any potential future terror attack will be, in part, the responsibility of MPs for rejecting his policy he failed to take responsibility for the actual terrorist attack which flowed directly from his own.

And what of this majority support he pointed to? Ignore the fact that we have been presented with a very one-sided version of exactly why these powers are needed. In true authoritarian manner, he appealed to an abstraction: “I have no doubt where the country is on this.” Yet “the country” does not exist. Rather the individuals who live in a country exist and they did not all agree with Blair. So why does the PM think the people support his draconian laws? Because, apparently, a YouGov poll says that over 70% support the government’s policy. And who commissioned that poll? Sky News. Murdoch strikes again. Needless to say, the people who commissioned the poll get to specify the questions so, inevitably, skewing the results. A different set of questions (like, say, “do you think the police should hold someone without any evidence of a crime for 90 days”) would have produced different result.

Not that the results actually back the government’s position. The 72% for 90 day internment is a composite figure of two positions. 31% supported the idea that the present 14-day limit for holding suspected terrorists without charge should be increased to 90 days. 41% agreed that the 14-day limit should be increased to 90 days – but only in those cases where the police can persuade a senior judge that the time is needed to gather evidence against the suspect(s). This second option, it must be stressed, is not what the current Terrorism Bill is offering. This means that only 31% support Blair’s policy as expressed in the Bill. True, this is nearly 50% more than who backed Blair in the general election but it is far from the overwhelming support.

Blair talked of the compelling case made by the police? Like the compelling case made by the security services to invade Iraq? There are far more compelling cases against the law. Internment in

Northern Ireland bolstered support for the IRA. The Guildford Four. Police assassination of innocent people suspected to be terrorists. The use of anti-terrorism laws against protestors (including hecklers of the New Labour elite at their own conference). The fact that the police lie (one example: they told us Jean Claude de Menzies was running and wearing bulky clothes). That the police have a long history of abusing their powers. The list is endless.

Looking at Home Office statistics, 97% of those arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act between 1974 and 1988 were released without charge. Only 1% were convicted and imprisoned. Since 9/11, this pattern has repeated. Of more than 700 people arrested under the Terrorism Act since then, half have been released without charge and only 17 convicted. Of these, only three relate to allegations of Islamic extremism. To have detained people for 90 days without charge would only have increased the risks of terrorist attacks as it could have caused further alienation in the Muslim community without any increased success in fighting terrorism.

What of anarchism? Clearly, politicians cannot be relied upon to defend civil liberties. What liberties we have are the product of struggle, of resistance to the state and its attempts to extend its power. As such, their best defence exists outside Parliament. Only a strong people, willing to use direct action and solidarity, can ensure its own freedoms.

But what if the majority seek limitations in civil liberties? In that case, the minority must seek to persuade the majority of the errors of their ways – by propaganda, debate and, if need be, direct action.

Anarchism recognises that the majority can be wrong. It recognises that progress lies with those minorities who question the assumptions of the many and convince them that they are false. Real reforms, never mind revolution, become possible when the minority's position becomes accepted by the mass. The case for self-management, for direct democracy, is not that the majority is always right. It is that an elite, even an elected one, will govern in

its own interests. It is that, in order to be free, one must have a say in the decisions that affect you. It is that participation in common affairs has an educative role and that it raises awareness of those involved.

Given this, anarchists see their role as defenders of freedom, both within this system and any libertarian one we may help create. Part of this task is to resist those who seek to limit our freedoms today. Another is to create organisations which can successfully mount that resistance. Another is to create the conditions (a stateless/classless society) where such limitations are hard to introduce by eliminating hierarchical organisations and empowering everyone to participate in the decisions that affect them. This will help ensure that everyone has a keen interest in their own and other people's freedom.

Only this can defend individual freedom from both the tyranny of the minority (what we have now) and the potential tyranny of the majority.