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Terrorism Bill: A Leap into the Stratosphere

by Floyd Millen

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RACE On THE AGENDA replies to the Home Secretary's Anti Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill.

The events of September 11th pose a direct challenge to security in the UK. Home Secretary David Blunkett published his Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Bill on 13th November 2001. The review of terrorism legislation, which preceded the introduction of the Terrorism Act 2000 already, gave the government the necessary powers to protect UK citizens. This new Bill however expands significantly on these already established powers and leaves us teetering on the edge of a 'state of emergency'.

ROTA has consulted on the perceived ramifications of this bill and feels that it has the potential to further ostracise particular members of the Black community and increase the likelihood of abuses of power by agencies charged with its implementation.

For the last 30 years the British government and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) have been engaged in a bloody and very public war. Thousands of lives have been lost and millions of lives have been blighted. To suggest that the UK's response militarily, economically and politically to the atrocities of September 11th are anything but a seismic shift in our level of tolerance to terrorism would be folly. The question is why is such a draconian bill being introduced at this stage, the prevention of terrorism act was supposedly in place to prevent this precise situation

occurring. Does this not suggest that the current law was applied selectively? Are we now in the position of reselecting whom to apply this bill to based on race and religion?

Few would contest that we should assess and review our laws to see where they may be strengthened in an attempt to provide increased security from terrorism and fear of terrorism. ROTA agrees that in order to combat global terrorism law enforcement agencies need powers and information, to prevent abuses of our immigration and asylum procedures, protect our citizens as they go about daily life and restrict and cut off funds to terrorists.

What is however in contention is the specifics of how this will be done and the implicit criminalisation of yet another section of our diverse community. This Bill takes a leap into the stratosphere and has within it serious implications for human rights and the rights of individuals to be respected and treated fairly regardless of race colour, or creed.

According to the Home Secretary:

"This bill contains proportionate and targeted measures that will ensure and safeguard our way of life against those who would take our freedom away."

When one reads the bill it is clear that significant sections of the proposed measures far from preventing terrorism in fact infringe on civil liberties, pander to populism and illuminate the distinctiveness of certain communities as predisposed to terrorism by virtue of their religion.

For example; The Bill would "remove the scope for people to unreasonably refuse to assist the police in identifying them by allowing the police to require the removal of hand and face covering."

How do we define unreasonable? In the calm light of day and in hindsight this may be easier to establish however in a less defined situation it is fraught with difficulty. We may therefore see the battle lines being drawn not between Protestant and Catholics as in Northern Ireland but between Christian and Muslim here in the 'United' Kingdom.

The bill also places:

"an obligation on the financial sector to report where there are 'reasonable grounds' to suspect

terrorist financing."

This places an overriding emphasis on financial institutions to scrutinise transactions that in particular have connections with Muslim communities inside and outside the UK. The objectivity and impartiality of this is questionable however there are many who would agree that it is high time financial institutions - and indeed governments - were held to account for their financial undertakings which occur despite concerns about the probity of those involved.

There are already laws in place to protect our citizens. What is needed is for the current laws to be effectively executed and correctly applied. This bill emanates from a populist agenda and will not prevent terrorism. What it does however is reflect our heightened degree of sensitivity, intolerance and aversion to the threat of terrorism and proposes measures that go far beyond what is practical, fair and necessary.

Care should be taken that we do not increase the risk of setting in motion self-fulfilling prophecies that criminalise 'communities' through legislation. If we begin to search for breaches of laws where laws have been written within the context of the distinctiveness of particular communities we are likely to find and generate much evidence to support preconceptions and prejudice. In order to win the war on terrorism we need to endear and foster the trust of Black communities in Britain. We need to look at our foreign policies and assess how they impact on the families of those who now reside in the UK.

The events in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham and the British National Party general election results all highlight the fact that harmonious race relations in Britain is still something we need to strive for. If we successfully engage our diverse communities then we will have built a truly 'United Kingdom'.

Let us all hope - especially where this bill is concerned - that our representatives in Parliament are truly representing our interests in a vigorous and meticulous manner.

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