



TERRORISM BILL DEBATE

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South) (Lab): The opening paragraph begins in a fairly straightforward way:

"In the Lenin Barracks in Barcelona, the day before I joined the militia, I saw an Italian militiaman standing in front of the officers' table."

It goes on to offer both encouragement of, and glorification of, what was to follow: "Something in his face deeply moved me. It was the face of a man who would commit murder and throw away his life for a friend—the kind of face you would expect in an Anarchist, though as likely as not he was a Communist."

The encouragement and glorification is found at the end of the paragraph:

"Obviously he could not make head or tail of the map; obviously he regarded map-reading as a stupendous intellectual feat. I hardly know why, but I have seldom seen anyone—any man, I mean—to whom I have taken such an immediate liking."

That is the opening of an illustrious and well-known book written by Mr. Blair—Eric Blair. Those who find it easier to recognise him as George Orwell will also recognise that it is the start of "Homage to Catalonia", a book that unambiguously sought to praise those participants in the civil war in Spain who attempted to create a republic. Blair himself was open about, and proud of, his own involvement in that process as a "brigadista".

I am not sure that the family tradition of such political alliances still continues, but throughout the recent history of this country—and certainly within the Labour and internationalist movements, and in the history of our literature—"Homage to Catalonia" has been regarded not as a revolutionary tract, but as an honourable, distinguished and legitimate book. However, it falls foul of the Bill's definitions of acts of incitement of, and encouragement of, terrorism.

Mr. Llwyd: "Homage to Catalonia" was on the book list when I was doing my A-levels at Llanrwst school. It is a great book, but perhaps we should remind ourselves that the same author wrote "Nineteen Eighty-Four".

Alan Simpson: He did, and perhaps that book also encourages and incites resistance to tyrannical regimes.

Jon Trickett : Had I read out a passage from "Homage to Catalonia", I would have chosen precisely the one that my hon. Friend chose. Is it not a fact that the Independent Labour party, which was part of the Labour party, glorified what was happening in Barcelona during the Spanish civil war—such as the violence committed against Franco—and that sections and individual members of the Labour party actually raised money to arm those in Barcelona who were resisting fascism, and sent over International Brigade troops? Did not distinguished

Labour party and trade union members fight in Spain in a manner that would now be described as terrorism? If that happened now, the Labour party would doubtless be prosecuted under this Bill.

Alan Simpson: That is absolutely true, and it is precisely the reason why I and other Members from all parts of the House have tabled amendments to a clause that is an absurdity.

Mr. Hogg: What the hon. Gentleman says about literature is entirely right, but does he not agree that precisely the same point applies to any historian writing in laudatory terms, and in an historical sense, about struggles in any part of the world?

Alan Simpson: I completely accept that point, which was also made by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews). He said that the British Library cautioned the Government about the draconian consequences that would follow, were this House daft enough to pass legislation that included such terminology.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway also drew our attention to the question of fund-raising for such causes. I do not doubt the generosity of his hospitality toward those Members who were involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and supported the African National Congress. I suspect that he, like many of us, contributed cash to that process—cash that supported the ANC's work. To do so would now be seen as actively encouraging the actions that were then taken.

The huge danger is that the Government are treading into such areas without thinking through the consequences. The question has been raised of the position of Members of this House and members of the wider public who take issue with the actions and very existence of non-legitimate regimes throughout the world.

It is true that that case can be made about Burma, which has a wretched regime. Do we wish to make it a terrorist offence actively to speak about events in that country, and to encourage the resistance movement in such countries to pursue regime change? It is crazy to land ourselves in the position of gagging society and not allowing people to pledge their support or call for international support for those in domestic troubles who seek to free themselves from tyrannical regimes.

Mr. Hogg: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a curious paradox here, in that on the one hand, it appears that it is proper for Governments to wage war to procure regime change in Iraq, whereas on the other, if we recommended that the citizens of Iraq should have risen up to destroy Saddam Hussein, we could be prosecuted in this country for doing that?

Alan Simpson: Indeed, that is a paradox. We seem to have drifted into the dreadful position whereby over the past few years, the international perspective has drifted away from a presumption that all countries should be held accountable to the international courts and the Geneva conventions. Instead we are allowing ourselves to drift into a world where the rules are written by the rich and powerful. If someone is in a position to conduct an illegal war and pursue regime change on that basis, they subsequently rewrite international law to justify that. But to invite, encourage or support people within tyrannical regimes to do precisely the same

thing becomes a terrorist act. That is nonsense.

Mr. Denham: Does my hon. Friend recall the first President Bush, at the end of the first Gulf war, urging the Iraqi people to rise up and overthrow Saddam Hussein? Has he considered the possibility that had this Bill been in place at that time, the President would have been guilty of an offence under British law, and subject to seven years' imprisonment?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: Not all bad, then.

Alan Simpson: Indeed, there are considerations that might make me think again about the unexpected virtues to be found in such a Bill—but I doubt whether that is the sort of person who would be hauled before the British courts.

Mr. Salmond : The President would then be fighting a legal war—unlike the one that his son pursued—but, given the international scope of the Bill, he would simultaneously find himself on the wrong side of the domestic law of the United Kingdom. Even somebody pursuing an internationally legal action could find that action illegal under this ridiculous Bill.

Alan Simpson: That highlights the paradoxes and absurdities in the Bill.

A couple of weeks ago Parliament added to the list of proscribed organisations an Uzbek organisation calling for the removal of the Karimov regime and free democratic elections. Apparently we did so on the advice of the intelligence services that the group in question was responsible for acts of terrorism within its own country. Two days later, in *The Guardian*, the then British ambassador to Uzbekistan took issue with that and, as someone who had visited the sites where it was claimed that acts of terrorism had taken place, said that they all bore the hallmarks of Government killings, with an attempt to set up the notion that they had been committed by terrorists, although there was no evidence to support that claim.

We know that Uzbekistan is a regime with a wretched record of persecuting its own citizens, torturing them and boiling them in oil. It is a horrible regime by any standards, and we ought to be able to call on the international community and the domestic communities to remove it—but under the definition in the Bill, we would not be allowed to do so.

The far-reaching consequences of the Bill in its current form are so draconian as to provide legislation that could virtually have been drafted for us by al-Qaeda. If we want to see acts that destroy the framework of liberties, confidence in democracy, accountability to the judiciary and rights of representation, they are to be found enshrined in much of the panic legislation that has been pushed through this House as an extension of the war in Iraq in the form of a war on our own liberties. We are doing what al-Qaeda sought to do by other means, and society will not thank us for it.

Those who say that there are lock-in provisions in the preconditions about encouragement, glorification and emulation need to look at clause 1(4), which points out that it is "irrelevant . . . whether any person is in fact encouraged or induced by the statement to commit, prepare or instigate any such . . . offence."

So it does not matter what people do; it is the act of saying or writing that constitutes the criminal offence—indeed, the terrorist offence—under the Bill.

I know that my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway ducked the question about extraterrestrial activities—I assume that that should have been "extra-territorial"—but I want to draw the attention of the House to the fact that an in-house consequence would follow from the Bill, under the current definition of terrorism. I know that we will come to that at a later stage, but people such as myself who have pledged to be part of the Green Gloves campaign against the growing of genetically modified crops, were they to be allowed in the UK—those of us who will doubtless go out and seek to remove those crops and replace them with organic non-contaminating crops—would be in breach of the Terrorism Bill; and also if we made the intellectual and political case for doing that.

There are many people outside the House who are extremely happy to see the definition of terrorism widened in a way that will allow global corporate interests to define civilian and domestic opposition to the policies that they are trying to push through, not as acts of resistance by consumers but as acts of environmental terrorism—a phrase that they are already beginning to use. They will use exactly the same terms as appear in clause 1, and say that people are guilty of acts of encouragement, glorification and encouraging others to emulate what they have done—and thus are committing terrorist offences.

The dangers of criminalising the whole framework of social protest and resistance within our own society is a dreadful draconian step. I would love it if the Bill would allow us to prosecute the President of the United States—but he will not be brought before the courts. Neither will the Baptist minister in the United States who, interviewed on Channel 4 News last week, openly said, with regard to the 7/7 bombings in London, that the only shame about it was that 1 million people were not killed. He said that England deserved to be bombed in that way. Will he be branded as a terrorist? Will he be brought to trial before the UK courts? No.

The Rev. Pat Robertson, the head of the Christian Coalition in the United States, will not be brought to trial here either, although he has openly, on television, called for the assassination of the elected President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. No one like that will be brought before the courts, but Muslim lads in this country making similar claims or criticisms about events in the middle east are precisely the ones who will be picked up. They will be defined as being in breach of the terms of the Bill, because it is not directed at crazy mullahs who are notionally on "our" side, but only at the crazies on other people's sides.

The real danger is that the Bill is a first step down the path that leads us away from judging people on what they do. In the end, we will all be judged—by our own courts or by international courts—on the acts that we commit. However, we are starting to move away from that premise and to judge people, in broad and speculative terms, on what they say.

The next step will be to judge people on what they think. For me, that is the hallmark of a society that is beginning to retreat from the founding and fundamental principles of an open and democratic society, and to take its Parliament, institutions and citizens into dark days of tyranny. That is why I urge the House to support amendments that will change this absurd

clause.

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