

ADDICTED TO OSAMA

Last weekend Gordon Brown's office were furiously briefing the press that the new Brown, post Blair, era would be a 'listening' Labour government; one committed to winning hearts and minds rather than playing fast and loose with the democratic process. The man himself, however, was busy pre-empting today's announcement by the Home Secretary that new anti-terror laws are to be introduced. These proposals include the odious reintroduction of 90 day 'detention without charge' powers. It all seems ominously closer to a different philosophy espoused by Richard Daley, the former 1960s mayor of Chicago.

Daley, famously was on record as saying that if you have people by the balls 'the hearts and minds can follow later'. This, essentially, is what a 90 day period of internment is about. For all the police raids and detentions since the introduction of the Terrorism Act 2006 there is scant evidence that detention without charge has been successful in leading to charges on terrorism offences, nor that additional time would have made a fig of difference in the successful prosecution of terrorist offences. What it does do is play heavily into the politics of fear and insecurity.

One of the saddest things about Brown's decision to go down exactly the same path that Blair pursued is that it plays to exactly the same politics and misjudgements. The move may be popular with the Murdoch press, but the public have become more sceptical about government demands for the further erosion of liberties. Tactically it is not too smart of Brown either. The Lords are not going to alter their position on 90 day detention, and there is no compelling evidence why they should do so. In the Commons, the Tories, Lib Dems and other opposition parties will all stand firm against an extension of the current 28 day detention power. So too will a large number of Labour MPs. This will not come across as demonstrating Gordon's willingness to 'take on the Left'. It will be seen as his willingness to take up the same anti-democratic mantle as his predecessor.

Britain already has the most extensive period of detention without charge of any country in the free world and it doesn't bring us one step closer to addressing the key issues about terrorism and national security. To do this, Gordon has to question why the Britain he inherits is so much more a terrorist target than anywhere else in Europe. The answers are to be found elsewhere that - in the inextricable mess we have created in Iraq; in the stench of silence as the Lebanon was bombed; in our refusal to confront Israeli encroachment on Palestinian lands; as bag-carriers for the Bush administration over Afghanistan and Iran; and in our collusion in rendition processes which are little more than the outsourcing of torture.

These are the sources of anger that Gordon has to address, both domestically and internationally, if he is serious about a hearts and minds administration.

It is not to pretend that Britain does not face an inherited threat to domestic security. Sophisticated surveillance techniques are available to, and practiced by, all governments across the world. We may not like this, but we have to live with it. But plans to extend the powers and resources going into security services are more about a listening in government than a listening one. The question is whether we bring this information into the judicial process through which people have to properly be

tried.

When parliament last debated anti-terrorist legislation, it is worth remembering that it was the security services themselves who opposed the use of intercept evidence in court proceedings. Elsewhere in Europe the use of intercept evidence in trials is taken as a given. Only in Britain do the security services regard this as a threat to themselves. Bringing this into the open has to be a welcome move. What remains unquestioned is the government's own dependency on the terrorist threat.

It used to be that governments required another country as an enemy. The threat was about territorial occupation of a sovereign state. Against such threats governments make the case for conventional defence spending. If a government wanted to hide what it was doing from its own citizens, the argument had to be that disclosure would compromise the state's ability to defend its citizens from external attack.

The world of globalisation that Gordon Brown has himself helped to create has, however, different priorities. A fundamental shift of rights and responsibilities has taken place. Rights have been transferred from citizens to corporations, whilst duties have gone the other way. Governments have always used adventurist wars to distract citizen attention from the erosion of democratic rights. The War on Terror, however, has created the almost perfect enemy for a state that wants to conduct a more wholesale undermining of its democratic base. The new enemy is invisible, ubiquitous and uninterested in territorial conquest. More importantly, we can be told that the enemy is our neighbour, our friend, our son. The enemy becomes us.

I have always argued that this was where the war on Iraq would take us. Unwinnable internationally, unhealable at home, it is a war game in which we all become the losers.

In an open society, citizens must have the right to be charged, to be tried, and to defend themselves in a court of law. For Brown to insist on anything else makes him as psychologically dependent on Osama Bin Laden as Blair was. It would be a sign of weakness in a Brown administration rather than a strength. One way or another, all roads lead back to Iraq. Gordon does not need to imprison more of our citizens, but to end the imprisonment of our troops in hopeless, unwinnable wars. This may be more about Gordon's security than the nation's. His own first 90 days may say more about this than any internment plans he may have for the rest of us.