

Great Britain: Corona Virus Act 2020 - Sharpening the Fangs of Suppression

The Corona virus Act 2020 received royal assent on March 25 with the declared objective of “to make provision in connection with corona virus; and for connected purposes”. The wide range of measures adopted in the Act has little or nothing to do with the spread of corona virus pandemic.

Under the guise of the ‘national security’, powers of surveillance and detention have been greatly increased. Any person considered ‘potentially infectious’ by a police constable or immigration officer may be directed or removed to “a place suitable for screening and assessment”, where they may be held for up to 48 hours, with failure to comply considered a criminal offence. The arresting officer need only “consult a public health officer to the extent that it is practicable to do so”. It implies that, in practice, the arresting officer need not consult anybody before using these powers to detain an individual. After detention for another 24 hours for assessment, regardless of the results for corona virus, the officer may place restrictions upon that person’s “movements or travel ... activities ... [and] contact with other persons”. The provision applies not only to adults but to children as well. (Corona virus Act 2020, schedule 21)

The act also grants power for the investigatory powers commissioner (IPC), to appoint “temporary” judicial commissioners for a term of up to 12 months. Whereas previously a judicial commissioner had to be appointed by the prime minister, backed up by the joint recommendation from the lord chancellor, the lord chief justice of England and Wales, the lord president of the court of session, the lord chief justice of northern Ireland and the home secretary, now the IPC is required only to notify all the above, giving the IPC a completely free hand in creating judicial commissioners. (Coronavirus Act 2020, pt1 s22)

The secretary of state may “issue a direction prohibiting, or imposing requirements or restrictions in relation to, the holding of an event or gathering”. This covers not only outdoor spaces but any “entry into, departure from, or location of persons in, premises” in the country. Those caught in violation are subject to summary conviction and a fine. Thus any form of protest against the Act, or any other pressing social issue, is thus rendered illegal. (Corona virus Act 2020, sch22)

Another attack on social care provision comes with Schedule 12, which suspends local authorities’ obligations under the Care Act 2014. Under the Care Act, local authorities were duty bound to assess the needs of adults, carers and disabled children moving into adult care. Now, the local authority has full discretion over whether or not to make such an assessment. (Coronavirus Act 2020, sch12; Care Act 2014, pt1 s9)

The Care Act stipulated that the authorities must meet any adult’s care and support needs following assessment. The Coronavirus Act now supersedes this and completely absolve the local authorities of responsibility for the task of caring for vulnerable people. Key aspects of the Mental Health Act have also been relaxed. Whilst previously mental health professionals were required to be supported by two doctors in any decision to forcibly detain, hospitalise and medicate a person, now they need a recommendation from only one. Thus the act of forcibly detaining someone on mental health grounds has been made significantly easier.

The huge so-called ‘financial assistance measures’, more accurately termed ‘bail-outs’, have been given the green light by this Act – provided, of course, that they can be classified as “coronavirus-related”.

The Industrial Development Act enhanced by the Enterprise Act 2016, already allows the “secretary of state ... with the consent of the Treasury, [to] provide financial assistance” to the tune of £12bn, increasing to £16bn under the Enterprise Act. Under the present Act, pay-outs to the industrial sharks will not be limited to the £12bn.

Another measure in the Corona virus Act negates the role of the local community in planning decisions. Whereas, under more normal circumstances, planning decisions are supposed to be made in meetings that are open to the public, in which its voice can supposedly be represented, if only nominally, either in person or through the mouths of elected councilors, section 78 of the act does away with that. County, district, parish, London borough councils and the rest all now have the power to “make provision relating to requirements to hold local

authority meetings ... the places at which local authority meetings are to be held ... public admission and access to local authority meetings” and more. (Corona virus Act 2020, pt1 s78)

So for example the London borough of Croydon has replaced speaking rights with written statements, Islington has elected not to publicise meetings and Enfield recently closed a meeting on a major planning decision to the public. Manchester city council has taken things one step further and declared that all decisions will be made in closed meetings by a panel of just three people: the council chief executive, the chair of the planning committee and the deputy chair.

The measures outlined above are by no means an exhaustive list of the powers the ruling class has given itself under the guise of ‘tackling the health emergency’. Other measures include empowering government to postpone elections and to close borders at will.

The official duration of what is being sold as ‘temporary’ legislation is upwards of two years, subject to parliamentary review every six months.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (ML) has said:

“As communists, we cannot be opposed to the implementation of measures that really are aimed at stopping the spread of a particularly threatening disease. What we as socialists object to is the fact that while the government belatedly and half-heartedly announced a lockdown (waiting long enough to ensure a huge and entirely avoidable death toll in Britain), none of the other measures that have proven to be effective in tackling Covid-19 have been taken.

“These are the measures that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has been urging governments to take from the beginning, and which the countries that have so far managed to avoid significant outbreaks implemented months ago – mass testing, quarantining of all those testing positive for the virus, and tracing and isolating those they have recently been in contact with.

“If such measures had been properly put in place from the start, a national lockdown may never have been necessary at all. With testing and tracing still not fit for purpose, there is every risk of both a second deadly spike in infections and deaths as the lockdown is eased, and of the need for a second lockdown, with all its social and economic ill-effects, later in the year.

‘We are in favour of doing everything necessary and possible to protect lives, including providing economic support to all those who have been asked to stay at home.

‘What we cannot support, however, is the ruling class taking the opportunity presented by the crisis to pass measures that have very little to do with protecting lives and everything to do with maximising profits.

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