

Thought police muscle up in Britain

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BRITAIN appears to be evolving into the first modern soft totalitarian state. As a sometime teacher of political science and international law, I do not use the term totalitarian loosely.

There are no concentration camps or gulags but there are thought police with unprecedented powers to dictate ways of thinking and sniff out heresy, and there can be harsh punishments for dissent.

Nikolai Bukharin claimed one of the Bolshevik Revolution's principal tasks was "to alter people's actual psychology". Britain is not Bolshevik, but a campaign to alter people's psychology and create a new Homo britannicus is under way without even a fig leaf of disguise.

The Government is pushing ahead with legislation that will criminalise politically incorrect jokes, with a maximum punishment of up to seven years' prison. The House of Lords tried to insert a free-speech amendment, but Justice Secretary Jack Straw knocked it out. It was Straw who previously called for a redefinition of Englishness and suggested the "global baggage of empire" was linked to soccer violence by "racist and xenophobic white males". He claimed the English "propensity for violence" was used to subjugate Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and that the English as a race were "potentially very aggressive".

In the past 10 years I have collected reports of many instances of draconian punishments, including the arrest and criminal prosecution of children, for thought-crimes and offences against political correctness.

Countryside Restoration Trust chairman and columnist Robin Page said at a rally against the Government's anti-hunting laws in Gloucestershire in 2002: "If you are a black vegetarian Muslim asylum-seeking one-legged lesbian lorry driver, I want the same rights as you." Page was arrested, and after four months he received a letter saying no charges would be pressed, but that: "If further evidence comes to our attention whereby your involvement is implicated, we will seek to initiate proceedings." It took him five years to clear his name.

Page was at least an adult. In September 2006, a 14-year-old schoolgirl, Codie Stott, asked a teacher if she could sit with another group to do a science project as all the girls with her spoke only Urdu. The teacher's first response, according to Stott, was to scream at her: "It's racist, you're going to get done by the police!" Upset and terrified, the schoolgirl went outside to calm down. The teacher called the police and a few days later, presumably after officialdom had thought the matter over, she was arrested and taken to a police station, where she was fingerprinted and photographed. According to her mother, she was placed in a bare cell for 3 1/2 hours. She was questioned on suspicion of committing a racial public order offence and then released without charge. The school was said to be investigating what further action to take, not against the teacher, but against Stott. Headmaster Anthony Edkins reportedly said: "An allegation of a serious nature was made concerning a racially motivated remark. We aim to ensure a caring and tolerant attitude towards pupils of all ethnic backgrounds and will not stand for racism in any form."

A 10-year-old child was arrested and brought before a judge, for having allegedly called an 11-year-old boya "Paki" and "bin Laden" during a playground argument at a primary school (the other boy had called him a skunk and a Teletubby). When it reached the court the case had cost taxpayers pound stg. 25,000. The accused was so distressed that he had stopped attending school. The judge, Jonathan

Finestein, said: "Have we really got to the stage where we are prosecuting 10-year-old boys because of political correctness? There are major crimes out there and the police don't bother to prosecute. This is nonsense."

Finestein was fiercely attacked by teaching union leaders, as in those witch-hunt trials where any who spoke in defence of an accused or pointed to defects in the prosecution were immediately targeted as witches and candidates for burning.

Hate-crime police investigated Basil Brush, a puppet fox on children's television, who had made a joke about Gypsies. The BBC confessed that Brush had behaved inappropriately and assured police that the episode would be banned.

A bishop was warned by the police for not having done enough to "celebrate diversity", the enforcing of which is now apparently a police function. A Christian home for retired clergy and religious workers lost a grant because it would not reveal to official snoopers how many of the residents were homosexual. That they had never been asked was taken as evidence of homophobia.

Muslim parents who objected to young children being given books advocating same-sex marriage and adoption at one school last year had their wishes respected and the offending material withdrawn. This year, Muslim and Christian parents at another school objecting to the same material have not only had their objections ignored but have been threatened with prosecution if they withdraw their children.

There have been innumerable cases in recent months of people in schools, hospitals and other institutions losing their jobs because of various religious scruples, often, as in the East Germany of yore, not shouted fanatically from the rooftops but betrayed in private conversations and reported to authorities. The crime of one nurse was to offer to pray for a patient, who did not complain but merely mentioned the matter to another nurse. A primary school receptionist, Jennie Cain, whose five-year-old daughter was told off for talking about Jesus in class, faces the sack for seeking support from her church. A private email from her to other members of the church asking for prayers fell into the hands of school authorities.

Permissiveness as well as draconianism can be deployed to destroy socially accepted norms and values. The Royal Navy, for instance, has installed a satanist chapel in a warship to accommodate the proclivities of a satanist crew member. "What would Nelson have said?" is a British newspaper cliché about navy scandals, but in this case seems a legitimate question. Satanist paraphernalia is also supplied to prison inmates who need it.

This campaign seems to come from unelected or quasi-governmental bodies controlling various institutions, which are more or less unanswerable to electors, more than it does directly from the Government, although the Government helps drive it and condones it in a fudged and deniable manner.

Any one of these incidents might be dismissed as an aberration, but taken together - and I have only mentioned a tiny sample; more are reported almost every day - they add up to a pretty clear picture.

Hal G. P. Colebatch's Blair's Britain was chosen as a book of the year by The Spectator in 1999.