

Coronavirus Bill 2020 (21st March 2020) by Dr Rob Faure Walker

The coronavirus has exposed how successive governments' austerity programmes have failed to protect the most vulnerable in society. It has also revealed how the lack of an adequate welfare state has made us all less safe. The current Government's slow response to the virus, waiting until March to respond, when they could have done so in January has further exacerbated these issues. **They must now act decisively, but it is vital that MPs scrutinise the Coronavirus Bill and ensure that the correct response is now followed.**

The Coronavirus Bill proposes the removal of significant civil liberties. While this loss of liberty might be necessary to overcome the virus, the bill must offer greater guarantees that these liberties and hard-won rights will be returned. **To provide a reasonable guarantee for the protection of civil liberties that will be temporarily lost as a result of the Coronavirus Bill, it is incumbent on the Government that the bill is more time limited than the currently proposed two years. Any extension to the bill must be submitted to parliamentary vote.**

Without greater safeguards, proposed changes to the Investigatory Powers Act made in the Coronavirus Bill are unacceptable. These proposals will dismantle already weak safeguards to the interception of communications data, equipment interference, and the use of bulk personal datasets. That the powers proposed by the Coronavirus Bill are due to be in place for two years adds to this concern. **Historically, rights lost during exceptional circumstances are often not returned so the bill must provide stronger safeguards.**

While it may take up to two years or longer to protect the public from the virus, the bill must be reviewed by Parliament more frequently than the two years currently proposed. **It is vital that all MPs seek these greater safeguards to provide a greater guarantee that liberties lost as a result of the bill will be returned.**

The Government must now focus on protecting the most vulnerable in society. This must include providing support for the unprecedented numbers of precariously employed workers who have lost their incomes. This support must mitigate financial and associated risks such as evictions, domestic abuse and food insecurity. The Government must also protect frontline NHS workers from the virus. We will be judged by how we protect the vulnerable during this crisis, not only because this will help prevent the spread of the virus, but because it is the right thing to do.

The Government's actions over the last week will do little to help the vulnerable survive the virus, they must now focus on proactive support rather than the extension of already draconian powers.

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