

UK deputy leader: Surveillance bill won't happen

April 25 2013, by Raphael Satter

A mass Internet monitoring program touted by Britain's government as a terror-fighting tool is unworkable, the country's deputy leader said Thursday, vowing that it would not become law.

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's opposition means the sweeping surveillance regime—which would have tracked everything Britons did online—is likely dead in the water because his Liberal Democrats are the junior partner in Britain's coalition government and have an effective veto over official policy.

"The idea that government will pass a law which means that there'd be a record kept of every website you visit, who you communicate with on social media sites, that's not going happen," Clegg said in comments to London's LBC radio on Thursday. "I'm afraid I think that is not either necessary, workable, nor proportionate, so it's not going to happen."

The proposal would have forced communications service providers to retain for a year a huge amount of personal data—including a record of websites visited, emails sent and Skype calls made—and make it available to law enforcement and other government agencies at the stroke of a key. Authorities would need a warrant to see the content of calls, emails and other communications.

Officials argued that the proposal was key to helping police, spies, and regulators catch up with advances in online communications, but activists, academics, and libertarians expressed horror at what they

dubbed a "snooper's charter."

Clegg's opposition meant that the ruling Conservatives would have to rely on the opposition Labour Party to pass any eventual law—something one expert said was improbable.

"You can't rule it out," said Mark Bennister, who teaches politics at Canterbury Christ Church University, but he said it was "highly unlikely that the Conservatives would push ahead on something that they would need Labour support for."

Prime Minister David Cameron's office declined to say whether the bill would be included when the government announces its slate of legislation for the coming parliamentary term next month.

Julian Huppert, a Liberal Democrat lawmaker, seemed to express little doubt that the surveillance plan was history.

"It's dead," he said in a message posted to Twitter.

It's not clear that Britain's Home Office—which has been leading the charge on the surveillance program—saw Clegg's intervention coming. A spokeswoman said she wasn't aware of Clegg's comments when The Associated Press called seeking a response. She later said the Home Office would not be commenting.

Civil liberties groups were cheered by the news—although they also expressed caution about the future.

"We're happy that this is dead, but we need to make sure it doesn't rise from the dead again," said Emma Carr of Big Brother Watch, a U.K. group that campaigns against government surveillance.

Padraig Reidy of the London-based Index on Censorship echoed those concerns, warning that the police and intelligence agencies would doubtless be back with new proposals for Internet monitoring and surveillance.

"This is not an issue that will be dropped," he wrote in a blog post.

More information: Home Office information on the surveillance proposal: bit.ly/15Piesl

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