

## Politics

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# Government to offer terror bill compromise

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**Oliver King and Matthew Tempest**

Mon 7 Nov 2005 17.53 GMT

The government will tonight offer a compromise on its demand for police to be allowed to detain terror suspects for 90 days without charge, despite Tony Blair making a last-minute appeal to Labour rebels - and Tory MPs - to support the plan.

The Home Office will publish amendments to its own anti-terror bill, whereby, it is expected the permitted detention period could be cut to somewhere between 28 days and the original proposal of three months.

But, at his monthly press conference this morning, Mr Blair insisted he still backed the plea by the police to be given 90 days, despite the likelihood such a move will be defeated in the Commons vote on the bill on Wednesday.

The Tories have insisted they cannot support anything more than 28 days - a backbench Labour compromise suggestion last week - and the Liberal Democrats have drawn a line in the sand at the existing 14 days.

But today Mr Blair insisted he would spend the next 48 hours - starting with tonight's meeting of the parliamentary Labour party - twisting arms towards achieving the 90 days. Even if that bid fails, it could serve to bolster support for a lesser period, such as a rumoured deal on 45 days.

Mr Blair was scathing about the bill's opponents, warning: "If we are forced to compromise, it will be a compromise with the nation's security."

"We do not want to compromise on the 90 days at all," he said. "It is not the right thing for the country. Be under no doubt about that at all."

The prime minister said the government would be ready to consider "sunset clauses", requiring powers to be renewed on a regular basis by MPs, if that would help get the bill through parliament.

He also attacked David Davis and David Cameron - the potential Tory leaders - for not offering support on the issue. The home secretary, Charles Clarke, was this afternoon holding 11th-hour discussions with concerned MPs.

Meanwhile, the outgoing Tory leader Michael Howard warned that holding people without charge for as long as three months would create "great dangers to the

public" by building up "a burning sense of grievance against the system and against the country".

Mr Blair expressed frustration at the cross-party opposition to his plans, citing the terrorist outrages in London in July.

"We should never forget that this terrorist attack, the worst terrorist attack this country has ever had, happened just a few short months ago.

"Let me be very clear: this is not a plan dreamed up by me, or indeed with its origins in the government.

"It is what the most senior police officers in the country, the Metropolitan police commissioner, the head of anti-terrorist policing, the Association of Chief Police Officers ... it is what they have asked us to do as they battle to prevent further terrorist outrages after the July 7 attack."

With many Conservative MPs reluctant to oppose proposals demanded by the police, both Mr Blair and Mr Clarke appealed to wavering Conservative backbenchers to back the government.

Mr Blair, said: "I hope even now parliament will not force a compromise on us."

David Winnick, the Labour MP who withdrew his amendment extending detention to 28 days has retabled the same amendment. Mr Winnick's amendment still seems likely to win the support of the opposition if a vote is held.

Mr Davis, the shadow home secretary, visiting Chatham today, said: "One of [Tony Blair's] own backbenchers called 28 days the outer limit of what is acceptable and I don't think I have heard anything to change my mind on that.

"We will listen to the arguments but I still haven't heard anything to convince me that we should go beyond 28 days."

Mr Blair told journalists that because of the complexity of terrorist cases the police needed 90 days. "Why? To track complex trails of evidence, through highly coded computer records, to piece together terrorist networks spanning continents, languages, dialects, to break through the cover provided by false identities and to secure and analyse sites requiring often the most extensive forensic examination."

Mr Blair added: "I also say it is wrong to frame this debate simply in terms of the civil liberties of terrorist suspects.

"Of course their liberties are important, but so are the liberties of the people who may be victims of a terrorist attack.

"What about their most basic civil liberty, their right to life?"

The bill, which is being rushed through parliament, returns to the Commons on Wednesday. It is likely to face an even stormier ride in the House of Lords, where the

government does not have a majority.

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