

DT036

Emergency powers for the Government

The Home Office Minister Hazel Blears (Letter, 29 November 2004) is unfair to Philip Johnston. She says his article contains a number of misconceptions, but does not specify what these are. I can find none.

She implies that he alleged that the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 granted the Government 'dramatic new powers', but he did not say this. What he said was that the Government 'took sweeping powers'. This is accurate.

He did not say these powers were new because of course they are not new. Hazel Blears is mistaken in saying they have been available to governments only since the Emergency Powers Act was passed in 1920. In fact they have been available since 1914, when Parliament passed the Defence of the Realm Act (guyed by cartoonists as DORA, a fierce old lady with a threatening broolly).

One might find fault with Philip Johnston for saying the Act is 'objectionable' because its powers might be misused by a future government 'with scantier respect for democratic procedures than we have been used to'. But this does not make the Act objectionable because it cannot be avoided. We have to trust future governments not to abuse these essential powers.

The media are now more vigilant than ever before, and so are human rights bodies. We have little to worry us on that score.¹

¹ *Daily Telegraph* 3 December 2004. DT35.