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TONY BLAIR, writing for *The Sunday Telegraph*, explains why it is time for the silent majority to act against animal rights protesters who hinder medical research

PRIME MINISTERS don't often sign public petitions. After all, they usually either criticise the Government or demand priority treatment for a specific cause.

So announcing that I am to add my name to the on-line petition in support of animal testing when necessary is something of a break with tradition – and a sign of just how important I believe it is that as many people as possible stand up against the tiny group of extremists threatening medical research and advances in this country.

The People's Petition describes itself as "giving a voice to the silent majority" of British people in favour of properly regulated medical research. Now is the time to add my voice.

This week underlined why the time is right for such a show of public support. The appalling details of the campaign of intimidation – which include grave-robbing – show the depths to which the animal extremists are prepared to stoop. The letter-writing campaign just launched against GlaxoSmithKline shareholders shows why we must support and protect individuals and companies engaged in life-saving medical research.

It is research which has helped hundreds of millions of people through vaccines to eradicate mass killers such as smallpox and medicines and procedures to treat incurable conditions like heart complaints. Research, too, which holds out the hope in tandem with other scientific advances such as genetic modification of extraordinary breakthroughs in treating and preventing diseases as varied as cancer, muscular dystrophy and Alzheimer's.

British scientists and companies, as in the past, are at the forefront of this work. They continue to make a huge contribution to human health and well-being as well as creating thousands of highly skilled jobs in the UK. Only the United States has a more successful bio-science sector than Britain.

They deserve our thanks, support and protection.

A growing number of stages of vital research and testing can now be done, thankfully, without the use of animals. We all hope that the time will come when no animal testing is needed at all. But that's not the case at the moment. The new techniques available, including the use of tissue cell cultures and computer modelling, are used widely but are not sophisticated enough to replicate all the biological functions of living organisms. There is no alternative for the foreseeable future to using animals if we are to see the full benefits of scientific advances.

Britain, of course, has a proud history of animal welfare and protection. We should be more assertive about one of the very toughest licensing and control regimes in the world which is being tightened continually as new replacement procedures become available. Testing on great apes including chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans is banned here. In 1998 this Government outlawed testing of

cosmetics on animals.

The result is that experiments involving animals are subject to the tightest restrictions and monitoring. No animal procedures are allowed unless it can be demonstrated to an independent panel that the research is essential, that there is no realistic alternative and that any suffering is kept to an absolute minimum.

The extremist and criminal behaviour is not new, nor is it restricted to Britain. What is new are the increased efforts by Government, the police and the courts to stamp out this illegal and sometimes violent conduct. New powers brought in last year to counter the threat from animal rights extremists, better co-ordination and the establishment of a specialist police unit has led to an increase in arrests and a welcome reduction in incidents. The tough

penalties handed down by the courts to those behind the campaign of terror against the Hall family show how seriously this is now being taken.

But more needs to be done. The Company Law Reform Bill will allow directors to keep their home addresses private to prevent threats of violence or intimidation to them and their families and allow a company to refuse to release the

names and details of its shareholders unless requested for a proper purpose.

We will also consult further on exempting companies from providing full public details of shareholders in future. If more measures are needed to protect individuals, universities and firms or to root out the criminal extremist fringe, we will provide them.

But, crucially, we are now seeing a change in public attitudes as well as the law. We are now seeing very welcome signs of both individuals and firms being ready to stand up publicly to intimidation and making clear this tiny extremist fringe is out of touch with public opinion.

The robust stance of GlaxoSmithKline this week to the attempts to intimidate their shareholders is one example of the changed climate. So was the pro-test demonstration held in Oxford, which is soon to be repeated and deserves support. The People's Petition I am signing allows the public to express their support for animal testing for medical research under the strictest conditions and is another example of the determination of the public and organisations to make a stand.

Hundreds of millions of people in the UK and around the world today are alive and healthy because of the pioneering work of our scientists and researchers.

Many millions more will be spared an early death or a life of pain because of the research now under way. They deserve our support. And they should get it.

