

Australia

2000 Olympics used to boost political police

Mike Head
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The Howard government is planning to use the Sydney 2000 Olympics as a pretext to greatly strengthen the powers of the domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

ASIO is the political police force of the Australian government. For decades it has conducted surveillance, harassment and dirty tricks operations against socialists, militant workers and organisations and individuals regarded as opponents of the political establishment.

The Howard government's legislation will give ASIO sweeping new authority to tap phones, access computers and use tracking personal devices, under the cover of making security arrangements for the Olympic Games. This is a thinly-veiled attack on democratic rights and freedom of discussion.

The Olympics are still more than two years away, yet the government is moving to introduce its measures immediately. According to a leaked Australian Police Force document, the ASIO Bills are a high priority for the current Budget session of the national parliament. In its May 12 annual Budget, the government effectively increased ASIO's spending this financial year by \$11 million to \$68 million.

The most wide-ranging new provision extends the power of the ASIO Director General or his delegated officers to issue search and entry warrants in "exceptional circumstances". This will give the spy agency a legal carte blanche to conduct operations against political activists and organisations. Even the present formal requirement of obtaining approval from a judge or magistrate will be dispensed with.

Another measure will extend ASIO's operations into monitoring discussion on the Internet and breaking into computer files and databases. It will permit ASIO to access and copy data in any computer under warrant.

Further proposals will:

- Remove restrictions on ASIO's ability to collect foreign intelligence in Australia (whereas the agency was previously restricted to domestic targets);
- Increase the flexibility of warrants by extending the period they remain in force or allow them to come into effect after a specific period or event;
- Allow limited access to the central official AUSTRAC database of reportable financial transactions (permitting the agency to monitor the banking and purchasing activity of those under surveillance).

Civil libertarians have expressed concern both about the extent of the measures and the way they have been prepared. Council for Civil Liberties spokesman Kevin O'Rourke said the government was introducing "emergency-style powers, characteristic of wartime conditions, on an ongoing basis".

"The king hit is the power for the Director General to issue emergency warrants," he told a World Socialist Web Site reporter. "That extends all the powers of ASIO."

O'Rourke said civil libertarians had been expecting the Olympics to be used as an excuse to bring forward provisions that people would not tolerate at other times. He referred to the experience of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, where the FBI and other agencies secured broad new powers.

The Labor Party opposition has not opposed the plans, but instead asked for further details. The Labor leaders have been central to the maintenance and expansion of ASIO over many years. In fact, a Labor government — that of Ben Chifley — first established ASIO in 1949, in response to an industrial movement against the government, which culminated in a national coal miners strike.

In recent years records have been released showing that during the 1950s and 1960s ASIO drew up plans to round up and imprison up to 11,000 political opponents in military camps in the event of a war or emergency.

Files were kept on the activities, personal lives, movements and associates of all known members, supporters and sympathisers of left-wing organisations, including opponents of the Vietnam War. No doubt such operations continue today.

During the 1990-91 Gulf War, Labor prime minister Hawke and his senior ministers personally supervised and received reports on the undercover work of ASIO, such as phone-tapping, mail interception, bugging, infiltration of meetings and organisations. The Hawke government activated a national network of Crisis Policy Centres, controlled by the police, ASIO and the military, with the power to establish martial law over areas of the country in so-called emergencies.

ASIO also vets public servants and immigration applicants, barring those judged to be politically undesirable.

ASIO is part of an extensive security and intelligence network, that also incorporates the external Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), the prime minister's Office of National Assessments (ONA), the state police Special Branches, the military's Joint Intelligence Office (JIO) and an electronic eavesdropping agency, the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD).



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