

Australia:

Murdoch editorial justifies assault on democratic rights

The Editorial Board
27 November 2002

In the wake of the Howard government's release of a sweeping terrorist alert last week, the Australian media has lined up behind the government's efforts to condition public opinion to the far-reaching assault on democratic rights that is currently underway.

No commentator has questioned the timing or political purpose of the government's November 19 declaration that it had received "credible information of a possible terrorist attack in Australia at some time over the next couple of months". The vague warning coincides with the build-up to the expected US-led invasion of Iraq, to which the Howard government has committed itself unconditionally.

One editorial stood out, however, for its open justification for tearing up basic civil liberties and its branding of any opposition to police-state measures as tantamount to giving succour to terrorists. The November 21 editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* denounced all those who have criticised the recent violent police raids on Muslim families or have suggested the Howard government's policies have made ordinary Australians vulnerable to terrorist attack.

According to the editorial, "tolerance-worshipping, selective civil libertarians of Australia's Vietnam generation" and "anxiously affluent, fashionable post-modern, faux-bohemian babyboomers and their ideological offspring" have displayed "a stubborn refusal to face the reality" that Australia has become a target for "terrorists of the religio-fascist extreme Islamic persuasion".

The editorial asserted that this "new reality" made it necessary to accept far-reaching measures. "We can no longer carry sharp objects on passenger flights; unattended bags will be viewed with more suspicion; some people will be raided by ASIO [the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation]." It is an absurd amalgam: relatively minor airport precautions, to which there have been no objections, are equated with unprecedented raids by heavily-armed police that provoked significant public outrage.

These measures do not mean, the *Australian* proclaimed

that, "we will abandon our respect for freedom and the rule of law." But that is exactly what is signalled by the ASIO raids, during which houses were broken into, terrified families interrogated at gunpoint, and their belongings seized—all without the laying of any charges. Moreover, in the name of fighting terrorism, legislation currently being enacted by state and federal governments will give police further powers to make arbitrary searches and to detain and interrogate suspects.

The *Australian* editorial not only defends these measures but also seeks to create a poisonous public climate to stifle any criticism. Significantly, in its rush to identify the current opposition with the "faux-bohemian babyboomers," who opposed the Vietnam War and anyone who failed to swallow wholesale the Cold War ideology of the time, the newspaper evokes "the reality of the communist threat in the McCarthyite 1950s."

The McCarthyite 1950s in the US have, until now, been notorious, even in the mainstream media, for the vicious anti-communist witch-hunt that took place. On the basis of a network of anonymous informants, public servants, actors, journalists, scientists, academics, trade unionists and others were accused of being part of the communist "fifth column" and dragged before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Thousands were hounded, stripped of their jobs, blacklisted or jailed.

If the *Australian* refers approvingly to the McCarthyite period, it is because it feels the methods are appropriate today. The editorial's conclusion is a diatribe from New South Wales (NSW) state premier Bob Carr defending the ASIO raids, in which he declared: "If someone has done military training in Afghanistan, if someone is a member of [the Islamic fundamentalist Jemaah Islamiah] JI ... if someone has expressed sympathy for Osama bin Laden, I would want to know why ASIO and the federal police have not interrogated them."

The *Australian's* singling out of Carr for praise is not an

accident. His Labor government in NSW has been in the forefront of implementing a series of police state measures. Last week it announced a Terrorism (Police Powers) Bill granting “special powers” to the police whenever police commanders declare “an imminent threat of a terrorist act”.

The Bill will permit police, without warrants, to stop, search and demand identification of individuals, and to enter and search premises and vehicles, and seize goods, with or without the knowledge of the occupant or owner. Anyone, including a child, who resembles a “target person” or is near a “target area” or “target vehicle,” can be strip-searched. Even children under the age of 10 can be frisk-searched.

Police can use “reasonable force” in exercising these powers and anyone who “hinders” them faces up to two years imprisonment. If anyone objects to being searched, or is charged with any offence under the Bill, they must prove a “reasonable excuse” and will be tried summarily before a Local Court. No legal challenge can be made to the declaration of special powers, which can last up to 14 days at a time.

The Bill defines “terrorism” in the same sweeping way as the federal legislation adopted in June. It permits the government and the police to move against many traditional forms of political dissent, including demonstrations, lobbies, pickets and strikes. They can be classified as “terrorist acts” because they seek to “coerce or influence by intimidation” a government for a “political, religious or ideological cause”.

Led by Carr, the state governments are all enacting laws to hand their “anti-terrorist” police powers to the federal government, to overcome constitutional doubts about the new federal laws. This substantially expands federal power and represents a major shift in the legal and constitutional framework because, since Federation in 1901, domestic law enforcement powers have remained with the states.

In addition, Carr has announced moves to boost the surveillance and electronic tapping powers of the state police, reviving the notorious undercover activity of the former police Special Branch. He has also established a 70-strong para-military anti-terrorism unit and called for the deployment of the SAS and other military squads to patrol sites in and around Sydney.

The other state and territory governments, all Labor, are matching Carr’s measures. In Victoria, Premier Steve Bracks has outlined laws authorising the police to conduct covert searches of the homes and vehicles of people suspected of links to terrorist organisations.

At the federal level, Howard’s government has renewed the push for the delayed ASIO Bill, currently before a Senate committee. If it passes, anyone suspected of having information relevant to terrorism—whether they be a journalist, lawyer, priest, family member, work mate or

neighbour—can be held incommunicado for interrogation for up to a week at a time. They will be denied access to a lawyer for 48 hours and then only permitted to speak to an ASIO-vetted lawyer, with ASIO monitoring their conversations.

These measures are not aimed at protecting ordinary people from terrorist attacks; they are part and parcel of an unprecedented security, police and intelligence build-up directed against working people. Well before the September 11 attacks in the US, in the lead-up to the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the Howard government and the Labor opposition combined to pass military call-out legislation authorising the deployment of troops internally against “domestic violence”—civilian unrest—that the police forces are unable to quell.

The *Australian* claims that the only opposition to the anti-terrorist measures comes from a “small but self-important section of Australia’s media and political elite”. But if that were the case, the tone and contents of its editorial would be inexplicable. In fact, there are real fears in ruling circles that the views denigrated by the *Australian* have broad currency and reflect deeper undercurrents of unease, hostility and outright opposition to the impending war against Iraq and the economic and social policies of governments of all political persuasions.

The editorial’s targeting of the “tolerance-worshipping, selective civil libertarians of Australia’s Vietnam generation” is something of a Freudian slip. As the Howard government prepares to join the Bush administration in invading Iraq, there is a distinct nervousness in the ruling elite that this imperialist adventure will evoke a broad opposition to the war, to the political establishment and to capitalism on a scale that may surpass the radicalisation of the late 1960s. The police state measures now being enacted, along with the *Australian* editorial’s open support for the abrogation of democratic rights, are a sharp warning of the methods that will be used to deal with any opposition.



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