

# Australian government launches "anti-terrorist" advertising campaign

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On the eve of participating in a deeply unpopular US-led war against Iraq, the Howard government has launched a \$15 million three-month "terrorism alert" advertising campaign entitled, "Let's Look Out for Australia". The television, radio and newspaper commercials, which began on December 29, urge people to contact a 24-hour toll-free hotline to report any "suspicious behaviour" to Australian police and spy agencies.

While the advertisements attempt to portray a government concerned for the welfare of its citizens following the October 12 Bali bombing, the campaign has little to do with preventing terrorist attacks. The real purpose is to cultivate a climate of fear and apprehension and legitimise Howard's unconditional support for the Bush administration's "war against terror"; to divert attention from growing domestic social problems and to acclimatise the population to escalating attacks on democratic rights.

The commercials depict "typical" Australians in so-called "normal" activities, interspersed with footage of police conducting security surveillance and assurances that the government has increased spending on security measures. Deliberately vague, they appeal for people to "be alert but not alarmed," while offering no advice on what might constitute "abnormal" activity.

Prime Minister John Howard claimed it was not possible to provide details on "suspicious behaviour" because it "depends entirely on the circumstances". In other words, the government is creating the conditions for fear, confusion and narrow-minded prejudices to be given free rein.

In just the first three days of operation, the new government hotline took over 1,100 calls, including one from an 18-year-old man who claimed that an Aboriginal Muslim group in Western Australia was

planning to bomb Northbridge, in central Perth, and nearby Fremantle on New Year's Eve. While the allegation was obviously implausible, a crack squad of senior crime detectives, state security police and intelligence officers went into immediate action. Seven homes were raided and plans were activated for a full-scale terror alert before the caller was located and he admitted it was a hoax.

The most immediate victims of the "Let's Look Out for Australia" campaign will be Muslims and Middle Eastern and Indonesian immigrants, who have already been subjected to numerous physical attacks and acts of vandalism, as well as state harassment and police raids, since September 11, 2001.

Their persecution intensified following the Bali bombing with more than 100 cases reported in Sydney and Melbourne in October and November. Five mosques were vandalised, including the petrol bombing of the Melbourne Islamic centre. In Sydney's western suburbs, the home of a Muslim cleric was laid siege by over a dozen men. The house, which adjoins a local mosque, had several windows and walls smashed.

The advertising campaign has broader implications for the erosion of democratic rights. Under the guise of reporting "suspicious behaviour," anyone with a political or personal grudge is being encouraged to take it to the police and intelligence agencies. The government has failed to provide any details on what happens to the information given to the hotline. What mechanisms, for example, have been put in place to test its veracity? Does anyone accused of "suspicious activity" have the right to know the identity of his or her accusers? Can this information be challenged in a court hearing?

Faced with increasing opposition to its domestic policies and growing social inequality, the Howard

government has seized on the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in America to implement far-reaching attacks on democratic rights.

During the 2001 federal election, senior government ministers told the media that poverty-stricken asylum seekers traveling to Australia on overcrowded fishing boats could be Al Qaeda operatives. Former Defence Minister Peter Reith claimed that the government's inhumane clampdown on refugees was connected to the "war against terrorism".

Throughout 2002 the government, with Labor Party support, introduced new laws that have made sweeping redefinitions of terrorism and treason, which are now punishable by life imprisonment. Those accused of supporting terrorism are effectively required to prove their innocence.

Moreover, the new Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) powers bill, which is to be further debated in the first 2003 parliamentary session, will give even greater freedom to the spy organisation and other police agencies to not just raid homes, but to forcibly detain and interrogate suspects for up to a week without charge or legal representation. Anonymous information from the so-called anti-terror hotline provides wide scope for detaining anyone on the flimsiest of grounds. Combined with ASIO's new powers and beefed-up anti-terror laws, the commercials and the hotline are helping to create the foundations for a nationwide network of informers.

The Bali bombing in October became the occasion for Howard to ratchet up his attempts to create a permanent state of anxiety among ordinary people. Since then the government has issued a series of travel alerts and terrorist warnings, none of which have been accompanied by a shred of plausible evidence.

Australians have been told to avoid South East Asian countries and in November the government claimed to have received intelligence that a "credible threat" existed that the country would be hit by a terrorist attack before the end of January. Newspapers displayed pictures of prominent buildings and landmarks, such as the Opera House and Harbour Bridge in Sydney, being guarded round the clock to prevent a likely attack. A few weeks later, the Australian embassy in the Philippines was shut down, after the government announced the building had been targeted.

On December 24, just five days before launching the

advertising campaign, Australian Foreign Affairs declared that Australians in Indonesia should avoid shopping centres, international fast food outlets and up-market entertainment areas. Australians were also warned to avoid traveling to South Africa. A perplexed and angry South African government demanded the Howard government withdraw the warning.

There is little doubt that Australia could well become a target for terror attacks in the coming period. But the most significant factor in creating such a potential catastrophe is the Howard government's own policies. The government's decision to participate in the Bush administration's criminal and reckless attack on Iraq will only inflame an already explosive situation in the Middle East and elsewhere.



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