

# Australian police raid Aboriginal newspaper

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Australia's reelected Howard government has launched a blatant attack on press freedom with a federal police raid on November 11 on the *National Indigenous Times* (NIT), an Aboriginal newspaper.

The operation, which was requested by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, occurred a day after the newspaper published leaked Cabinet documents and departmental memos on the government's planned new assault on Aboriginal social welfare. Other newspapers, including the *Australian Financial Review*, which published extracts from the documents, were not raided.

The racially-discriminatory and wide-ranging government proposals include plans to monitor and financially penalise Aboriginal parents who do not ensure their children attend school or conform to government directives on health and other social issues. (For further details see: Australian Aborigines become first target for "welfare reform".)

In a clear attempt to politically intimidate the fortnightly publication, five Australian Federal Police (AFP) spent two hours searching the paper's Canberra office, as well as editor Chris Graham's house and car. While AFP officers had a warrant to seize two official documents, they confiscated six.

A defiant Graham immediately denounced the government, declaring that he had more internal documents and would continue to publish them. "I can assure you there's more to come and it's not pretty," he said.

"This government has been dishonest in the way it's dealt with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal affairs generally. I can understand them not wanting it to get out, but I can't for the life of me understand how they thought raiding our offices would have assisted their cause."

Australia's Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, as well as international press freedom organisation,

Reporters without Borders, condemned the raid.

In a letter to Prime Minister Howard, Reporters without Borders General Secretary Robert Ménard said that the police had "violated the principle of the protection of sources, which is fundamental to guaranteeing independent investigative journalism" and called on Howard to take action against those responsible. Howard has not responded to the letter, nor has there been any official explanation given as to why the *National Indigenous Times* was singled out for the raid.

NIT editor Graham told the local media he was not worried about possible criminal charges over the publication of internal government documents. Under Section 79 of the Commonwealth Crimes Act it is a serious offence, punishable by a seven-year jail term, to release or publish official information without authority or to retain or communicate such information.

"We would wear whatever consequences," he said, "but I sincerely doubt the Government will persist in this line. They've been exposed as being arrogant and stupid, and I think they'll crawl back from whence they came rather than push this any further."

Graham's claim that the Howard government has been embarrassed by publicity over the issue and therefore will not press charges is naïve. The government has regularly used police raids and other methods to try and intimidate journalists critical of the its line or anyone releasing politically embarrassing internal documents.

This includes a series of police raids in September 2000 over leaks to the media of intelligence documents on East Timor. Among those raided were a senior Labor Party official, a former diplomat and an Australian army intelligence officer. The papers revealed that the government knew more than a year in advance that the Indonesia military was organising militias to terrorise the local population if they voted in

a United Nations referendum to secede from Indonesia. The Howard government has always claimed that it had no evidence or knowledge of Indonesian-sponsored terror militias prior to the referendum.

More recently, AFP officers raided the *Australian* newspaper last month and spent two hours ransacking the offices of editor in chief, Chris Mitchell, and investigations editor, Natalie O'Brien, in Sydney. The AFP agents were looking for government documents given to the newspaper which indicated that Australian intelligence services had been warned two weeks before the October 2002 Bali bombing that an Indonesian chemist and engineer named Sukoco could be involved in future terrorist attacks in Indonesia.

Likewise, the Howard government has maintained an ongoing effort to muzzle the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the state-funded national broadcaster. Last year Richard Alston, then communications minister, launched a campaign against the *AM* radio news program, claiming its coverage of the US-led invasion of Iraq was “biased” and “anti-American”. Despite ABC management rejecting these baseless claims, Alston, who has quit the government, is continuing his war against the program.

Any belief that the Howard government will refrain from laying charges against the *National Indigenous Times* or back away from its use of police because of unfavourable publicity should have been finally put to rest by comments this week from Peter Shergold, chief of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Shergold told an Australian Graduate School of Management function on November 17 that he had never hesitated in mobilising the police—nor would he in the future—against any journalist or media outlet publishing internal government documents.

“Some people seem surprised that I called in the police—they shouldn’t be, I always will,” Shergold said. Unauthorised publication of government documents, he said, was “democratic sabotage” which “blows apart the Westminster tradition of confidentiality upon which the provision of frank and fearless advice depends”.

These pronouncements are thoroughly hypocritical. Last year the Howard government launched a smear campaign against former senior intelligence analyst Andrew Wilkie, who resigned from the Office of National Assessments (ONA) in protest over the invasion of Iraq. Wilkie publicly denounced the

government’s lies about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction and addressed various antiwar rallies in the lead up to the US-led attack on Iraq.

In a desperate effort to undermine Wilkie, a classified ONA intelligence report written by him was leaked to *Herald Sun* journalist and loyal Howard government supporter, Andrew Bolt. Bolt used the material to try and discredit Wilkie.

In contrast to the government’s immediate attack on the *National Indigenous Times*, no action has ever been mounted, by Shergold or any other government department, against Bolt or the state officials who leaked the highly secret material.



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