

# Australian “counter-terrorism” summit to discuss police-state measures

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27 August 2005

As it did after the September 11 and Bali terrorist atrocities in 2001 and 2002, the Australian government has seized upon the July 7 bombings in London to bring forward a new wave of measures that will overturn centuries-old civil liberties.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister John Howard announced that, together with the premiers of the states and territories—all from the Labor Party—he will convene a “special meeting of the Council of Australian Governments to consider counter-terrorism issues,” which will be held on September 27.

Asked by journalists if the initiatives to be discussed could curtail civil liberties, Howard declared: “The most important civil liberty you and I have is to stay alive. To protect people from attacks is in favour of, not against, civil liberties.”

In the name of this “liberty,” what is being asserted is the right of the state to trample over essential civil liberties. The entire historical relationship between the individual and the state is being turned on its head. Basic democratic rights—such as free speech, no detention without trial, and the presumption of innocence—were established in centuries of struggle against absolutism, a battle that dates back in the English context at least to the Magna Carta of 1215.

By implication, those who defend traditional civil liberties will be depicted as enemies of “liberty” who would expose people to violent attacks.

In fact, it is Howard and his ministers who bear direct responsibility for increasing the danger of terrorism by joining the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. This year, he and his ministers have escalated the risk by dispatching more than 600 extra troops to prop up the American puppet regimes in those countries.

Having lined up completely with Washington’s predatory ambitions in the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia, Howard, like Bush in the US and Blair in Britain, is utilising the incendiary results to justify police-state measures at home.

Over the past five years, the Howard government has, with Labor’s parliamentary and political support, already used the “war on terror” as a pretext to introduce a barrage of laws, each granting unprecedented powers to the federal government and its security agencies.

“Terrorism” has been made punishable by life imprisonment and defined so widely that it covers many traditional forms of political dissent. Cabinet has been given the power to outlaw organisations that it labels terrorist. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) has been authorised to secretly detain and interrogate people without trial, even if they are not suspected of links to terrorism. Terrorist trials can be held behind closed doors. The military can be called-out to combat “domestic violence,” that is, civil unrest.

Now further inroads into democratic rights are being prepared. Howard has nominated new items for the summit agenda: counter-terrorism legal frameworks, preventing advocacy of terrorism, surface transport security, identity security and “enhancing community understanding of and engagement in the national counter-terrorism arrangements”.

Under the heading of “legal frameworks,” Howard and his Attorney-General Philip Ruddock have foreshadowed an array of moves. These include extending to possibly three months the time that anyone can be detained for interrogation by ASIO. Such detentions are currently limited to one week, with ASIO able to apply for extensions. Those detained are prohibited from notifying anyone, except for a lawyer. If the detention period were extended, it would mean that people could disappear into ASIO’s custody for up to three months without trace.

Ruddock has also ordered a review of his powers to ban organisations as “terrorist.” This follows an ASIO recommendation that he did not have grounds to outlaw Hizb ut-Tahrir, a fundamentalist group that advocates the non-violent establishment of an Islamic state, or caliphate, throughout the Middle East. The proscription power is currently limited to organisations that the attorney-general is “satisfied on reasonable grounds” are “directly or indirectly engaged in, preparing, planning, assisting in or fostering the doing of a terrorist act (whether or not the terrorist act has occurred or will occur)”.

Following the lead of the Blair government in Britain, Ruddock and Howard have also advocated outlawing the “advocacy” of terrorism. This would criminalise the holding or voicing of political opinions, as distinct from the taking of any actions related to terrorism. In Orwell’s terminology, it would amount to creating a “thought crime”.

Howard has added “citizenship deprivation” to the agenda list. This would involve stripping foreign-born Australian citizens of their civil rights on the basis of vague claims, to be determined by the immigration or foreign ministers. Victims could be detained, potentially indefinitely, as “unlawful non-citizens” in one of Australia’s immigration detention centres or deported to a country where they may face persecution and torture. As has already happened in Britain, such powers would enable the government to lock people away without going through any trial process whatsoever.

The “identity security” agenda item is about establishing a national ID card system that would give security officers and government officials instant access to databases of personal information. The system could track everyone’s health, social security and tax records, financial transactions, travel and daily movements. A similar “Australia Card” proposal by the Hawke Labor government in 1987 was defeated after overwhelming public opposition.

“Surface transport security” means, among other things, stepping up the use of armed police and sniffer dog squads on rail systems and other public transport.

It is revealing that, in explaining the need to “enhance community understanding,” Howard warned against complacency about a possible terrorist attack in Australia. The collapse of the lies used to justify the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq has produced growing public scepticism in the “war on terror”. One of the purposes of the summit is to whip up new fears of possible imminent terrorist atrocities.

In this drive, the government can count on the full assistance of the Labor Party opposition. Its parliamentary leader Kim Beazley signalled a further shift to the right by Labor in a speech delivered at the Sydney Institute on August 4. He declared that Australia remained “unprepared” for the threat of terrorism and “the Prime Minister must assure all Australians he is doing all he can to prevent an attack”. In order to “endlessly detect and surveill [sic],” ASIO and the Australian Federal Police “must have the resources and powers they need”.

Over the past five years, while Labor has eventually backed every piece of “counter-terrorism” legislation introduced by the Howard government, it has claimed to have helped strike a better “balance” between repressive measures and civil liberties. It has now abandoned its past lip service to retaining some restraints on the intelligence and police forces. The term “civil liberties” was not mentioned in Beazley’s speech.

Instead, he called for the spending of “a billion dollars or part thereof” on recruiting hundreds of additional ASIO agents and federal police officers, and providing them with the “very latest surveillance technology, equipment and personnel needed to track, harass and ultimately arrest terrorists”. Given their current budgets, which have already been massively expanded over the past four years, this would mean doubling or nearly trebling the size of ASIO and the Australian Federal Police.

Beazley argued that the money could be diverted from Iraq, which he described as a “billion-dollar war with no end in sight”. Labor has no fundamental differences with the occupation of Iraq and has dropped any suggestion of setting a deadline for the withdrawal of troops. Beazley simply reiterated Labor’s tactical differences with the occupation as a distraction from the “war on terror” in Afghanistan and at home. Being “bogged down in an Iraqi quagmire” was not in Australia’s national interest, he said.

Beazley added a new twist to Labor’s policy of creating a US-style Department of Homeland Security to coordinate and concentrate all the powers and resources of the spy, police and border patrol agencies. He urged the Howard government to disregard any constitutional limits on building up the powers of the state and federal security forces. He said the government had to “accept that every element of the struggle is a national responsibility, whatever the Constitution may appear to dictate in normal times”.

This invoking of a “war time” atmosphere to override Constitutional restrictions is ominous, particularly given that the state governments have already referred their police and law enforcement powers for “terrorism” to Canberra at a previous summit.

Beazley specifically called for federal measures to beef up the state police forces. He advocated “model national uniform laws for police powers” and action by Canberra to ensure that states met “national benchmarks” for combatting terrorism.

These benchmarks could be based on the type of laws introduced by the state Labor government in New South Wales. Led by former

Premier Bob Carr—whose last key act before resigning last month was to write to Howard proposing the summit—the NSW government has adopted some of the most repressive anti-terror legislation in Australia. Police have been given almost unlimited powers to arrest individuals, bug or raid homes and offices, and seize property and documents on the pretext of finding illicit drugs or stopping terrorist acts.

Beazley also described the Immigration Department as being “on the front line of national security,” saying it needed to become “one of the smartest and sharpest of all government agencies”. This was said amid popular disgust with revelations that the department, acting in line with the government’s anti-refugee policy, had illegally locked up at least 200 people, after falsely accusing them of being “unlawful” residents. Far from opposing these abuses, which flow from the system of mandatory detention established by Labor in 1992, Beazley called them “bungles” that compromised the department’s “border protection” role.

The Labor leader, whose nickname is “Bomber Beazley” from his days as defence minister in the 1980s, endorsed the Howard government’s growing preparations for calling out the military to deal with domestic incidents. He welcomed the redeployment of army Blackhawk helicopters to Sydney, Australia’s biggest city, in order to support counter-terrorism operations by the two SAS units now based there.

At the same time, he called for the extension of Australian military exercises and operations in south east Asia, with specific references to the southern Philippines, the Malacca Straits and cooperation with Indonesia. This would amount to an aggressive assertion of Australian military capacity in the region, pursuing the strategic and economic interests of Australian business under the banner of fighting terrorism.

As with the invasion of Iraq, the flexing of Australia’s military muscles in the impoverished countries to the country’s north will only exacerbate tensions and discontent, further aiding recruitment by Islamic fundamentalist groups.

The coming together of both major political parties to push for the adoption of further extraordinary intelligence, police and military measures has nothing to do with protecting ordinary people from terrorism. It is bound up entirely with the underlying program of militarism abroad and social reaction at home.

Domestically, political disaffection and dissent will only grow as the pro-market agenda of the Howard government, on every front from the planned workplace relations laws to the privatisation of Telstra, widens the gulf between the wealthy elite and the working people. Increasingly, the program of enriching the privileged few can be enforced only through repressive measures.



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