

Anger mounts over Australia's anti-terror laws

Richard Phillips
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The tabling of the Howard government's draconian Anti-Terrorism Bill 2005 in federal parliament last week and the passage of a special amendment providing additional sweeping police powers, followed early this week by dawn raids and the arrest of 17 Islamists, has produced a wave of popular opposition throughout Australia.

Thousands of ordinary people are rightly concerned about the deeply anti-democratic character of these measures. Under conditions where the Labor Party has backed the laws and the Australian Democrats and Greens have joined with the Laborites in the Senate to pass the government's emergency anti-terror amendments, one of the few outlets for this popular concern has been in the letter pages of the daily media.

The past two weeks have seen an avalanche of letters bitterly attacking the government's anti-terror laws and Labor's support for them. Writers from across the country—rural areas and urban middle and working class suburbs alike—have poured scorn on the Howard government and correctly warned that the new laws have nothing to do with stopping terrorism, but are aimed at establishing the basis for a police state.

One writer to Melbourne's *Herald Sun*, for example, warned on October 22 that Australia stood "at the cusp of a dire new phase in its history" and called on people to "resist a new regime of tyranny".

"I do not want to live in a police state and that is exactly what we will become if police are able to jail, tag with electronic bracelets and restrict the activities of people all without laying a single charge."

Many writers pointed out that the anti-terror laws "would have little or no effect against terrorism" and be used to illegalise genuine anti-government opposition and make Australia a "one-party state". A *Sydney Morning Herald* letter writer declared: "The new sedition laws don't prevent terrorism; they prevent free speech—the right to beg to differ and think for oneself (qualities that only tyrants fear). To approve of such laws is to hate democracy."

An Oakleigh South writer to the Melbourne *Age* warned that the secrecy provisions in the anti-terror laws were "extremely dangerous".

"Only a government afraid of revealing mistakes made in the operation of these laws, or one seeing possible value in their misuse, would insist that the detentions they provide for be kept secret.... As those who lived under South Africa's apartheid regime have pointed out, the laws that the Howard Government is proposing pave the way for a police state."

The indefinite and secret detention of individuals who have incurred the suspicion of ASIO or the police, another writer to the *Age* explained, would "allow intelligence organisations to remove permanently—to 'disappear' in the Chilean or Argentinean sense—anyone they dislike. Nor is it unlikely that this would happen here. Pinochet had many vocal supporters among members of the parliamentary Liberal Party."

In the Melbourne *Herald Sun* letters page John Fraser said that, "preventive detention" was "the most frightening law ever suggested by an Australian government".

"The first question we must ask," he continued, "is 'why?' What reason could any government agency have for imprisoning people in

secret without even their families knowing?

"There is only one answer that comes to my mind. Once a person is locked up in secret, the Government can do anything it likes to that person. They can coerce that person into agreeing to, or confessing to, anything they want. Once accountability is removed from law enforcement, people can be, and will be, abused. We must all act quickly to stop these proposals from becoming law."

Many writers referred to military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina or South Africa under apartheid. Other comparisons were made with the Reichstag fire in Berlin, which was used by Hitler as a pretext for the Nazis to establish their dictatorship.

In an October 26 letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* Andrew Partos wrote: "No sooner did Hitler's army invade Hungary in March 1944 than my father, as part of the democratic intelligentsia, was arrested by the SS. But we were still allowed to tell one and all what happened to us. With the planned laws, if ASIO arrests me due to my anti-Howard views my family will not be allowed to tell anyone. Goodbye free speech."

A former South African citizen noted: "In my childhood, I couldn't follow politics because the newspapers were censored. I have the vaguest of memories of adults talking in hushed tones about 90 days and 180 days when, with one simple amendment, the statutory period of detention was increased. I have never been back to South Africa. And now, whether I want to or not, John Howard is taking me there."

Numerous letter writers denounced the legislation's "shoot to kill" policy and referred to the cold-blooded murder of Jean Charles de Menezes, the Brazilian worker executed by London police in the aftermath of the July 7 terror bombings.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* letter remarked: "As this arrogant Federal Government is only too aware, a fearful population is easier to rule than a defiant one.... I am not as fearful of terrorist attacks as I am of this Government's lies, deception, scare tactics and ill-conceived policies."

Another letter stated: "John Howard is right. Terrorism surrounds us: the terror of the growing inequality between Aboriginal and white society; the terror of poverty, and prejudice against minority groups; of the displaced, of the alienated, homeless, and the indefinitely detained; of the elements; of the deterioration in public utilities and essential services; of the decline in the quality of leadership; of government mismanagement; of the Government's proposed workplace changes. Last, but not least, we face the terror of government by stealth, deception and self-interest."

Numerous letters made clear that the danger of terror attacks was created by Australia's participation in the US-led invasion of Iraq. One angrily described Howard as a "snake oil salesman". "He begins by poking a stick in a nearby hornets' nest. Then, when the hornets are buzzing around, he does his best to kill the hornets with smoke bombs. Naturally, this makes them even madder.

"Once the local populace is terrified of the hornets, he kindly offers to sell the locals an insurance policy which necessitates the populace staying indoors, well-protected by screen doors and metal shutters."

As opposition grew against the new laws last week, Howard claimed that he had received intelligence of a possible terrorist attack and, with backing from Labor, the Australian Democrats and the Greens, had amendments to the existing legislation rushed through an emergency Senate sitting. The alleged attack was clearly designed to create fear and panic and silence opponents of the anti-terror laws (see “Unanswered questions about Australia’s ‘terrorist’ alert”).

Oppositional letters, however, become even more scathing, with writers pointing out the government’s record of lies, subterfuge and scare mongering on a range of issues. One described the intelligence warning as a “con-job” and that the government could not be trusted on any issue, another bluntly condemned it as “a farcical addition to a litany of lies”. Others openly suggested that the government would probably be involved orchestrating any future attack.

As one letter writer to the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented on November 4: “I’m quite positive there will be a terrorist attack in Australia. The sad thing is now, after all the recent ‘coincidences’, one of my first thoughts will be: ‘Did the Government have a hand in this?’”

“I hate to say it, but I’ve reached the stage where if a politician were to say ‘the sky is blue’, I would go out and check it before I even thought of believing it was true.”

Howard was described in one letter as “the most untrustworthy prime minister of recent history” and leading the country “into the hysteria of a security state”. A one-sentence letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* stated: “I have two positives to say about the latest terrorist ‘threat’—yeah, right.”

Dave Bridges in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* said: “Wednesday’s convenient warning by the intelligence service of a specific terrorist threat provides an insight into the way the service operates. When it suits the Prime Minister they tell him what he wants to know. Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction is another example. When knowledge might be embarrassing, such as children not thrown overboard, Mr Howard is kept in the dark. No wonder the Prime Minister has confidence in Australia’s intelligence services.”

In fact, such is the level of distrust of the government that one listener phoned a Sydney radio station last week to report that she was in a supermarket checkout line when Howard’s announcement of an impending terror attack was broadcast. Store patrons and staff simply laughed at the warnings, convinced that it was another political stunt by the government.

On November 8, hundreds of heavily-armed state and federal police were mobilised to arrest 17 Islamic fundamentalists—the biggest police operation in Australian history—claiming to have thwarted a planned terror attack.

While the majority of letters published in the press supported the government the next day, no doubt confused by the 24-hour government and media hysteria that accompanied the raids, a substantial number continued to raise serious doubts over the so-called anti-terror operation.

One letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* uncompromisingly declared: “I have no doubt at all that the police raids in Melbourne and Sydney are politically motivated and a disgrace. John Howard has proved time and again that he will stoop to any means to get what he wants and this is no exception. Of course he is trying to divert attention from the diabolical industrial relations proposals and he will continue to do so. I await the next bombshell from his stockpile of dirty tricks.”

Felix Dance from North Melbourne wrote to the *Age*: “Terrorists and conservative governments are mutually dependent. Terrorists need conservative governments to wage war on them, creating martyrs and more recruits, while conservative governments need terrorists to scare the electorate into re-electing them and giving them more draconian powers.”

The most politically significant letters have been those voicing their rage against the Labor Party and concluding that it has formed a virtual

coalition with the ruling Liberal-National parties.

Labor leader Beazley has been angrily denounced as “a big ball of fluff” and the state Labor premiers variously described as, “hypocrites” “spineless”, “snivelling lackeys” and urged to join the Liberal Party.

A Western Australian letter writer to the *Sydney Morning Herald* remarked: “I have rarely been as upset as I am reading the article ‘Beazley locks divided ALP into terror laws’. In my opinion, those members of the front bench of the Opposition should get up, cross the floor and sit with the Liberal Party, where they really belong. There is no Opposition in Australia today.”

Other letters declared: “Breaking news—Kim Beazley appointed as Deputy Prime Minister. John Howard welcomes him aboard as a man who shares his views ...” Another remarked: “The day will come when Mr Beazley writes his memoirs and finally admits that he was a sleeper for the Liberal Party all along. Why doesn’t he come clean now instead, and officially join the party he clearly believes has the vision for the Australia he wants to live in on every significant issue being publicly debated?”

A November 8 letter from a Queensland reader to the *Sydney Morning Herald* sarcastically stated: “The Germans have an instrument so sensitive that it can detect an object moving one-million-billionth of a millimetre. Would such an instrument (an interferometer) be useful in measuring policy differences between Mr Beazley and the Government?”

Judy Banberger wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* on November 2 stating: “Labor appears to have adopted a ‘we too’ policy towards anti-terrorism legislation. ‘We too’ can lock you up, detain you, control you, search you, seize your possessions based on suspicion alone. ‘We too’ can go even further than the Liberals: securing entire neighbourhoods and searching any person/place therein; banning books and media based on a flimsy description of objectionable content.

“Obviously Labor doesn’t give a stuff about protecting our civil liberties any more than the Liberals. No, they are leading us towards becoming a third-world nation of thought police and mind control.”

Notwithstanding illusions in many of the letters that Labor might be different if Beazley or the state premiers were removed, the level of distrust and alienation with the Labor Party is unprecedented. It further demonstrates the vast chasm that separates Australia’s ruling establishment—the government, “opposition” parties and the corporate media—from millions of ordinary people.

The palpable political outrage expressed in these letters is yet another indication that masses of people are being politicised by the government’s so-called “war on terror” and its attacks on basic democratic rights.

All those who oppose the government, and Labor’s slavish support for it, must recognise, however, that no amount of popular “pressure” or protest will force them to change course. The defence of democratic rights can only be advanced through the development of an independent political movement of the working class that directly challenges the profit system itself.



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