

Australia: right-wing columnists label political dissent akin to “terrorism”

Rick Kelly
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Right-wing media commentators in Australia have responded with bewilderment and ill-concealed fury to the overwhelmingly sceptical response of millions of ordinary people to the Howard government’s announcement on November 8 that it had disrupted an imminent terrorist attack. Two of the country’s most prominent op-ed writers, Miranda Devine and Greg Sheridan, have gone so far as to declare that opposition to the government represents a threat to national security.

“You’d think the series of raids in Sydney and Melbourne this week might have caused the uber-cynics among us to at least draw breath,” Devine wrote in her article “A reality check for the wise and good” published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on November 10. “But, no, the news sent some to the keyboard to tap out more letters to the editor accusing the Prime Minister and Labor state premiers of colluding in a stunt to impose laws on the populace that will turn us into a police state, make us terrified and compliant, while diverting attention from the industrial relations bill.”

Greg Sheridan, writing in the *Australian* on November 12 (“Conspiracy theorists fuel fire”) issued a similar complaint. “What happened next [i.e. after the terrorist alert] was incredible,” he declared. “Half the media, especially the ABC, and a good portion of the intellectual class, as well as the minor parties, immediately decided that John Howard had concocted the whole thing as a stunt to distract attention from the industrial relations legislation. This is almost too insane to admit to the mainstream of discussion but it was almost the orthodoxy last week.”

What Sheridan would like banished from “mainstream discussion” is the popular view that the terror scare was yet another cynical and politically-driven manoeuvre by the government. Ordinary people wrote scores of letters to every major newspaper, accusing the prime minister of manipulating security issues in order to divert attention from his government’s wider agenda. Many noted that the terrorist raids fortuitously coincided with the passage through parliament of the deeply unpopular “WorkChoices” industrial legislation, which is aimed at driving down workers’ wages and conditions (see “Anger mounts over Australia’s anti-terror laws”).

Both Devine and Sheridan quoted critical comments issued

by Democrats and Greens senators. As the *Australian* columnist put it: “the minor parties took the lunacy the furthest, with the Greens’ Bob Brown as ever seeing dark, satanic forces behind Howard’s every move.... Democrats leader Lyn Allison, leading the party into oblivion, took the irrational to a kind of X-Files meta-parody by wondering aloud, after the raids, whether the Prime Minister could not have rung the state police commissioners and asked whether there was not some raid or the other that could be conducted to justify the legislative amendments.”

Sheridan’s vitriol was all the more remarkable given that not a single senator from the Greens or Democrats voted against the emergency legislation rushed through parliament on November 3. While representatives of the minor parties criticised Howard’s manoeuvres, when it came to the Senate vote they all lined up behind the government.

In a particularly revealing statement, Miranda Devine described popular scepticism as a threat to Australia’s security. “The opposition Western democracies face from within, from armchair critics in an era of instant comment and saturation information, has the potential to undermine national security as never before,” she declared.

In a similar vein, Sheridan asserted that, “undergraduate paranoia and bizarre desire to see the world as an endless series of conspiracies naturally reinforces the conspiratorial world view of the radical Islamists.

“Who can blame a radical Islamist for interpreting the actions of the Australian state as malign and directed at Muslims, if even the Australian Democrats can apparently interpret the most gravely serious police actions in this light?

“In other words, what seems like just normal nonsense and tomfoolery from marginal players in Australian politics feeds into the fantasies and dark paranoia of more disturbed or dangerous players.”

These remarks cannot be dismissed as the ravings of two right-wing lunatics. Sheridan is an influential Australian foreign affairs analyst, and has written widely on Australian politics and developments in the Asia-Pacific region. Miranda Devine specialises in writing provocative comments on various social and political controversies. According to the *Bulletin* magazine, she is the country’s highest paid columnist, rumoured to earn

\$250,000 a year. Using the platform provided by the nominally liberal *Sydney Morning Herald*, she has promoted every aspect of the Howard government's reactionary social and economic agenda, occasionally criticising it only for not going far enough.

Devine and Sheridan's equation of political dissent with terrorism reveals the contempt felt in right-wing media circles for basic democratic rights. Moreover, their positions reflect the unstated reasoning behind the Howard government's new anti-terrorism laws. While the government has been careful to conceal its real motives, Devine and Sheridan's writings provide an insight into the nature of the discussions taking place within Australia's ruling elite.

The "Anti-Terrorism Bill" currently before the Senate contains a series of far-reaching and draconian measures that effectively create the legislative framework for a police state. Alleged terrorists can be secretly detained for two weeks, without charge and without unhindered legal access. Suspects can also be issued with "control orders" that impose house arrest and other major restrictions for up to 12 months.

The most revealing aspect of the new legislation concerns the provisions regarding sedition. "Urging disaffection" against the government, promoting "feelings of ill-will or hostility between different groups" or urging conduct to assist an "organisation or country engaged in armed hostilities" against the Australian military, whether or not a state of war has been declared, will all be illegal. Those found guilty face seven years' imprisonment.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly warned that the Howard government's terrorism legislation is not driven by concern over the threat to ordinary people of a terrorist attack. It is primarily aimed at creating the legal framework for a massive crackdown on political dissent (see, for example, "Australia's 'Anti-Terrorism' Bill: the framework for a police state").

Divine and Sheridan's comments confirm this analysis, and illustrate the thoroughly anti-democratic and repressive logic behind the Anti-Terrorism Bill.

The *Australian* columnist concocted a crude amalgam between radical Islamists and political critics of the Howard government, on the basis that both "interpret the actions of the Australian state as malign". As far as Sheridan is concerned, anyone who fails to unquestioningly accept the government's line on the "war on terror" is providing succour to terrorism.

"This is why political leaders, and media and intellectual leaders too, have a responsibility to act and speak with some restraint," he declared. His call for "restraint" amounts to an insistence on the cessation of all critical analysis of the operations of the Howard government, and is especially aimed at silencing any objective assessment of the essential political function of the "war on terror".

Miranda Devine went even further, explicitly demanding that the government suppress free speech. She approvingly quoted a

World War II veteran who claimed that the British and Australian people "willingly gave up many freedoms at the outbreak of war in 1939". "Germans were interned and sent to Canada and Australia," she continued. "The famous 'Dunera boys' were shipped off to an internment camp in Hay. There was rationing and currency restrictions, freedom of speech was curtailed, newspapers censored and posters abounded with slogans such as 'Loose Lips Sink Ships.'"

The *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist left no doubt that she would fully endorse such censorship and mass internment for today's "armchair critics".

Devine's reference to the detention of the "Dunera Boys" provides a chilling insight into the meaning of her historical comparison of the open-ended "war on terror" with the Second World War. During World War II, more than 2,700 predominantly Jewish refugees who had fled Germany and Austria were shipped from Britain to Australia on HMT Dunera in 1940. The refugees—among whom were prominent intellectual, artistic and scientific figures who had courageously opposed the Nazi regime—were then classified "enemy aliens" and herded into a concentration camp ringed with barbed wire in rural New South Wales.

Devine's use of the term "national security" has nothing to do with any conception relating to the protection and safety of ordinary Australian citizens. She is referring to the security of the state. Like the Howard government, the columnist fears the threat posed to the entire political establishment by mounting popular opposition to the major political parties.

Neither the government nor the Labor Party has any means of, or interest in, counteracting the deepening social polarisation throughout the country. On the contrary, both are committed to implementing unpopular right-wing economic measures that will further exacerbate social inequality. At the same time, the Australian ruling elite has tied its future, in defiance of the popular will, to the neo-colonial agenda of US imperialism, both in the Middle East and in the Asia-Pacific region. Under these conditions, it is rapidly moving to suppress dissent. The purpose of Devine and Sheridan's rantings is to help create the climate where this is deemed both necessary and acceptable.



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