

To silence opposition to police-state measures

Australian government declares “urgent” terrorist threat

Mike Head
2 November 2005

In a sinister bid to silence the opposition that has erupted to the police-state measures contained in his government’s Anti-Terrorism Bill 2005, Australian Prime Minister John Howard today suddenly called a media conference to declare that an imminent terrorist threat made it necessary to rush “urgent” parts of the Bill through parliament within 24 hours.

Without giving any details or providing any evidence, Howard said the government had received “specific intelligence and police information this week which gives cause for serious concern about a potential terrorist threat”. Details had already been provided to Kim Beazley, the leader of the Labor Party opposition, and to all the state Labor premiers.

Howard claimed that “immediate passage of this Bill” was essential to “strengthen the capacity of the law enforcement agencies to effectively respond to this threat”. He refused to give further details about the alleged threat or when the government became aware of it, citing operational security reasons.

Instead, he stated vaguely that the government was “acting against the background of the assessment of intelligence agencies that a terrorist attack is feasible and could well occur”. He cited the just-released annual report of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which dovetailed with the government’s propaganda in favour of the Bill by warning of an underlying “home-grown” terrorist threat, consisting of Australian-born Islamic extremists.

Noticeably, the Murdoch media played a prominent role in the lead-up to Howard’s announcement. This morning’s *Australian* splashed the ASIO report all over its front page under the headline: “ASIO fears terror cells among us”. Shortly after Howard’s media conference, other Murdoch outlets, such as the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, quoted the *Australian*’s national security editor, Patrick Walters, saying Howard’s statement pointed to “an imminent threat to Australians”.

“We know that ASIO and the AFP [Australian Federal Police] have been monitoring a number of people considered high security risks for a long period of time,” Walters said. “But clearly this takes things to a new level.” The requirement

for urgent laws, Walters said, “indicates (the Government) has far more precise intelligence relating to a group or an individual wanting to carry out a terrorist attack”.

At the press conference, Howard announced that a string of amendments to the counter-terrorism legislation would be pushed through all stages in the House of Representatives tonight and that the Senate, which is not sitting this week, would be recalled tomorrow to complete the passage of the laws. This immediate recall and 24-hour deadline has no known precedent in Australian parliamentary politics.

Howard also reiterated that the government remained determined to have the entire Anti-Terrorism Bill, which is yet to be even released to parliament, let alone the public, enacted before Christmas.

The “urgent” measures, contained in Schedule 1 of the Bill, are draconian and far-reaching. In the first place, they give the government and its security agencies far wider powers to arrest and charge people with a range of terrorism offences by removing the present requirement that the prosecution prove a connection to an identified, specific terrorist act.

All that the authorities will have to allege is that the accused’s conduct related to “a” terrorist act—that is, any potential act. In addition, a person can be detained and ultimately convicted even if “a terrorist act does not occur”. This gives the federal police almost carte blanche powers to arrest people on the vaguest possible charges of, for example, “assisting”, “preparing” or “supporting” an unidentified terrorist act that never takes place. Many of these offences carry life imprisonment.

Even more ominously, the amendments dramatically expand the government’s power to outlaw organisations by executive fiat. First, they extend the attorney general’s proscription power to groups that “advocate” terrorism. Second, they allow the banning of a group for preparing, planning, assisting in or fostering “a” terrorist act, also replacing the current need to prove a connection to any specified alleged terrorist act.

These provisions have sweeping implications because once groups are listed as “terrorist organisations,” all their members, supporters and financial donors are also liable to be arrested

and jailed for many years.

Furthermore, the “advocacy” measure is directly aimed at suppressing free political speech. “Advocacy” is defined as “directly or indirectly counselling or urging” or “directly or indirectly providing instructions on” or “directly praising” a terrorist act.

“Praising” terrorism could mean merely expressing sympathy for, or calling for an understanding of the social and economic roots of, terrorism. “Counselling or urging” could consist of supporting the right of people under occupation—for example, in Iraq—to resist the occupying military forces or a puppet regime.

These are among the most contentious provisions in the Anti-Terrorism Bill, together with two new forms of detention without trial—“preventative detention” and “control orders”—and wide-ranging additional sedition offences.

Everything about the timing of Howard’s announcement points to it being designed to create an atmosphere of emergency and fear in order to stampede public opinion on the eve of the introduction of the entire Bill into parliament.

For the past five weeks, Howard has been colluding with the Australian state and territory leaders, all from the Labor Party, to keep hidden from the public the details of the Bill, which they all agreed to implement at a September 27 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) counter-terrorism “summit”.

Just Friday, Howard went to the lengths of threatening legal action against the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) chief minister Jon Stanhope if he publicly released the final draft of the Bill. Stanhope had posted an earlier draft on the Internet, sparking widespread condemnation of its totalitarian features by lawyers, civil liberties groups, former judges and ordinary citizens.

Now, just at the very point where the Bill is about to be officially unveiled this week, with Howard having secured the final seal of approval from the state premiers, the prime minister has launched a blatant scare campaign so that the Bill can be railroaded through parliament as quickly as possible.

It is not that Howard fears any opposition from the Labor Party, federal or state. At his media conference, Howard revealed that he already had the unanimous agreement of the state premiers to the immediate introduction and passage of the Schedule 1 measures. Almost simultaneously, Victorian Premier Steve Bracks announced his acceptance of the final version of the whole Bill, adding his support to that of his New South Wales and Queensland counterparts, Morris Iemma and Peter Beattie.

Having been secretly briefed by the government, Beazley swiftly followed suit, confirming his embrace of the “urgent” laws. In fact, Beazley went one step further, saying he was ready to recall Labor’s Senators today to approve the changes. “If it has an extensive urgency, as indicated by the Prime Minister, it ought to be capable of being passed today and we stand ready to ensure that it goes through today.”

His assent was entirely predictable. Last Monday he declared

that federal Labor would back the passage of the entire Bill, with or without the cosmetic legal and judicial “safeguards” sought by the premiers to prevent the Bill being challenged as unconstitutional.

Rather, Howard’s sudden “emergency” is directed at suppressing the growing public hostility to the Bill and Labor’s support for it. Letter writers to the *Sydney Morning Herald* today provided a glimpse of the anger that greeted Beazley’s vow to pass the Bill.

One wrote: “So the Labor leader plans to give the Prime Minister everything he wants to combat terrorists, but only after a token fight. 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?”

Another commented: “If Kim Beazley likes John Howard’s anti-terrorism laws so much, why doesn’t he simply join the bloody Liberal Party? I think the laws are a disgrace and I will be writing to ASIO and the Howard proclaiming sedition. Down with the Queen, down with the Government, down with the war in Iraq, down with Guantanamo Bay, free David Hicks [the Australian citizen incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay since January 2002].”

As this writer suggests, his declared opinions will become seditious under the Anti-Terrorism Bill, exposing him to the threat of imprisonment for seven years for “urging disaffection with the government”.

Howard’s invocation of a security “emergency” is a serious warning of what is to come once the Bill becomes law. Terrorist “alarms” issued on the basis of secret and unverifiable information supposedly supplied by the police and intelligence agencies will be used to whip up scare campaigns to justify the suppression of political dissent.

These are the same politicians, security agencies and media organisations that pumped out the lies about “children overboard” to defend sending naval gunships to turn back leaking refugee boats in 2001 and “weapons of mass destruction” to join the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Now, once more with Labor’s bipartisan backing, the Howard government’s *modus operandi*—lies, deceit and misinformation—is being taken to a new level internally, in order to pave the way for implementing laws that will strip away fundamental democratic rights and political freedoms and establish the legal framework for a police-state.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact