"No threat"—but massive security at Melbourne Games

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16 March 2006

A glaring contradiction has emerged in the massive military and police buildup in Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city, for the (British) Commonwealth Games, which opened on Wednesday night.

In the lead-up to the Games, residents, athletes and spectators alike have confronted extraordinary measures. The 13,000-member Victoria state police force has been supplemented by 2,500 military personnel and thousands of private security staff. Special police units and soldiers have been visible, a naval frigate has been stationed off suburban beaches, sniffer dogs have patrolled venues searching for explosives, and Black Hawk helicopters and FA-18 fighter jets have flown over the city, enforcing a 75 km radius no-fly zone.

Federal and state government leaders and security representatives have justified the martial-law like atmosphere in the city as essential to protect the public against terrorism. Over recent weeks, however, the same authorities have increasingly emphasised that there is no specific terrorist threat to the Games, and urged people to carry on as if nothing had changed. This contrast highlights the cynical character of the so-called "war on terror".

On the one hand, the public has been told it must give up basic legal and democratic rights, such as freedom of movement and no detention without trial, and accept the hitherto-unknown sight of troops on the streets, accompanied by unprecedented police-military measures, including secret eavesdropping, street searches and "shoot to kill" powers. On the other hand, as soon as these conditions endanger commercial interests—in this case, Games ticket sales, advertising revenues and tourism profits—the story is very different.

Over the past year, the federal Howard government and state Bracks government have worked hand-in-hand to use the Games as a staging ground for police-state measures, including recently passed "anti-terrorism" and military call-out laws. The bipartisan character of the attack on civil liberties was underlined when all state Labor premiers backed the Howard government's planned legislation at last September's Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting.

First, the federal Anti-Terrorism Bills introduced two new forms of detention without trial—preventative detention and control orders (which can include secret house arrest)—new vague offences of "advocating terrorism" and wider sedition powers, aimed at outlawing the urging of "disaffection" with the government and any support for resistance to Australian military operations overseas.

Then, amendments to the Defence (Aid to Civilian Authorities) Act to dramatically enhance the government's powers to call out troops domestically against "domestic violence" or threats to "critical infrastructure" were rushed through federal parliament last month, just in time for the Games.

The Bracks government played its part by amending its Terrorism (Community Protection) Act. The original legislation, adopted in 2003, already enabled the police to secretly obtain warrants to enter any premises, search and seize anything, and plant bugging devices without the knowledge of the occupier. Under this year's amendments, police can obtain warrants merely by alleging that "a" terrorist act is being planned, even if no specific details or targets are identified. A senior police officer or judge can also secretly impose preventative detention orders for up to 14 days, simply on the basis of "reasonable suspicion" of intended terrorist activity.

In addition, Victoria's government introduced last-minute Commonwealth Games Arrangements legislation and regulations that give police vast powers, including to arrest people for such vague and sweeping offences as "disrupting or interfering" with the "comfort or enjoyment" of anyone at the Games.

In the lead-up to the 11-day Games, approximately 55,000 athletes, officials and volunteers have been subjected to security checks by the national spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Even residents living near Games venues have been required to carry special passes. Those aged over16 not wearing a pass can be fined $2000. Roadblocks, security stations and hundreds of guards are in place.

Police have warned ticket holders to expect unprecedented delays entering key event sites such as the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) and the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre. Spectators are being subjected to airport-style X-ray machines before being checked again by hand-held metal detectors. MCG fans queue outside a 2.4 metre-high fence, set back about 60 metres from the stadium.

Inside the ground, state and federal law-enforcement agencies watch over every spectator and square metre on a new $2 million network of 300 surveillance cameras. The MCG's underground and public car parks, including parklands around the ground, have been closed.

Intensive efforts have been made by the government, the police and the media to convince the public to accept the necessity for these measures. A February 6 *Herald Sun* newspaper report said people had "to get used to it".

Such language points to the permanence of the attacks on legal and democratic rights, going far beyond the Commonwealth Games. When the Terrorism (Community Protection) Act was first passed in 2003, Premier Steve Bracks claimed that it contained a "key safeguard"—a sunset clause that terminated the legislation on December 1, 2006. Under the amended legislation the cut-off date has been extended until 2016, that is, almost indefinitely.

In contrast, the lead-up to the Games has seen government and police leaders sharply downplay the terrorist danger.

While declaring that the security operation would be one of the largest in Australian history, second only to the 2000 Sydney Olympics, federal Attorney-General Philip Ruddock insisted that no specific threat existed. "Terrorist attacks are feasible but we have no specific information in relation to the planning of a particular act," he told Sky News this week.

Victoria's Police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon, who is in charge of Games security, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's TV show *Stateline*: "We've had people doing assessments all over the world and drawing on their resources from different countries, and there has been no threat to the Games. We have

confidence that that's the case."

Earlier, Nixon expressed the hope that people would not be turned off from attending Games events. "We want people to come to the games, to enjoy themselves ... we don't have any specific threats at all to the Commonwealth Games, and so we believe that we've put in place appropriate security, but we do really hope that people come and they enjoy themselves. That's what this is about."

One immediate reason for these comments has been the potential damage to Games ticket sales, which have fallen well short of official expectations. Up to 400,000 tickets remained unsold just a couple of days before the Games began. On Monday, Games organisers were forced to give away 5,000 tickets valued at $2.5 million to ensure a full house for Wednesday night's opening ceremony.

The revenue shortfall could be financially damaging for the Victorian government. In 2002, it said the cost of the Games would be $1.142 billion. While its contribution was capped at around $700 million, it was nevertheless obliged to commit to making up any deficit. This outlay is in addition to the estimated $125 million being spent on security (with the help of $85 million from the federal government).

The Howard and Bracks governments are in a quandary. They have sought to frighten the public into thinking a terrorist attack on the Games is possible, so as to accept the implementation of draconian measures as part of the "war on terror". At the same time, however, they fear that this campaign may have driven people away, and, more broadly, tarnished Melbourne's image overseas as a commercial and tourist attraction.

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