

Australian government revives book banning

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With the assistance of the state Labor governments, the federal Australian government is carrying out overt political censorship of books. So far, two Islamic volumes have been banned and preparations are underfoot to tighten censorship laws by agreement with the states.

The current campaign began in February, when federal attorney-general Philip Ruddock moved to take more control over censorship rulings. Ruddock announced that the two committees responsible for classifying books, films, TV programs, video games and other material—the Classification Board and the Classification Review Board—would be integrated into his department. Previously, they were within the Office of Film and Literature Classification, a formally independent agency.

In June, Ruddock applied to the Review Board to outlaw eight Islamic texts and one film, even though the Classification Board had previously cleared them, on the advice of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Director of Public Prosecutions. None of these agencies thought the books incited any crime, threatened public safety or contravened the expanded sedition laws passed late last year. According to the AFP, the material was “descriptive rather than inciting any type of violence”.

Ruddock’s intervention followed a media witchhunt, led by the Murdoch newspaper stable. The Sydney *Daily Telegraph*’s headline on May 15, for example, screamed, “Muslim ‘Books of Hate’ Get OK”. The newspaper demanded the banning of the books for, among other things, encouraging hostility toward police among Muslim youth.

The seven government-appointed members of the Review Board proscribed two books, *Defence of the Muslim Lands* and *Join the Caravan*, but allowed six others. As well as a film of a speech by a lecturer at an American university. People who display or sell the censored material can be jailed for up to two years.

The two outlawed books were written by Sheikh Abdullar Azzam, who was killed in Afghanistan in 1989. Ironically, both sought to justify the Islamic fundamentalist war against the Soviet-backed regime that

ruled at the time in Kabul. There was no move to ban the books in the 1980s, because the US and its allies, including Australia, were backing the Islamic groups as “freedom fighters”.

In its decision on *Defence of the Muslim Lands*, the Review Board acknowledged that the book, including its preface by Osama bin Laden, was written in 1984 as a “call to arms” against the Soviet invasion, “which was condemned at the time by much of the Western world including Australia, the UK and the US”.

Yet, the Board determined that the books promote and incite the crime of terrorism. It relied upon the wide definition of “terrorism” imposed by the federal and state “counter-terrorism” laws passed since 2002, which covers any act that causes “serious damage to property” in pursuit of a “political, religious or ideological cause” with the intention of intimidating any government or “a section of the public”.

The Board rejected submissions by the New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties, which protested that, “freedom of expression (and freedom of political communication in particular) is fundamental to the functioning of a successful democratic society”. The Council has since filed a Federal Court application to overturn the ban.

Censorship legislation already allows the banning of publications that “promote, incite or instruct in matters of crime or violence”. Ruddock wants to take it further. In July, he convened a meeting of Australia’s state attorneys-general, who agreed to consider new laws outlawing any material “counselling, urging, providing instruction or praising acts of terrorism”.

Under new federal and state “anti-terror” laws adopted last December, organisations that “advocate”, “praise” or “counsel” a terrorist act can be outlawed, exposing members, supporters and financial donors to imprisonment as well. “Praising” terrorism can mean merely expressing sympathy for, or calling for an understanding of, the social and economic roots of terrorism.

The law of sedition was also extended to proscribe “urging disaffection” against the government, promoting “feelings of ill-will or hostility between different groups” and urging conduct to assist an “organisation or country engaged in armed hostilities” against the Australian military. Those convicted face seven years’ jail.

Several universities, including Melbourne University, have since removed some Islamic fundamentalist books from their shelves for fear of breaching censorship or sedition laws. In a letter to Ruddock last month, university vice-chancellor Glyn Davis asked for an assurance that limited access to the books for research purposes was acceptable “and would not place the university, its staff or students at risk of prosecution”.

A coalition of library and literary organisations has condemned the forced removal of books from libraries. The Council of Australian University Librarians, the Australian Library and Information Association, the Australian Society of Authors and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions said banning books “takes away not only our right to read the opinions of others but also our right to disagree with what they say”.

Replying to Davis, Ruddock said he was prepared to consider exceptions—for research purposes only—provided that applications were made to his department on each occasion. His response shows the government’s determination to keep close surveillance over anyone reading the material. Last year, a Monash University student was questioned by police after purchasing and borrowing books on Palestinian suicide bombings, a subject he was researching for his course on terrorism.

Australian governments, state and federal, have a long history of political censorship, dating back to British colonial times. For example, Victoria’s Customs officials confiscated a shipment of works by Emile Zola and others during 1889 to protect the colony from the “subtle and deadly infection of French literary vice”.

During World War I, the *War Precautions Act* provided for suppression of material that showed “the gruesome effects of warfare”, gave “comfort to the enemy”, were “likely to prejudice recruiting” or promote disquiet about the “health or conduct of troops”.

After the 1917 Russian Revolution, the anti-socialist character of censorship was evident in a 1932 Commonwealth ban on John Reed’s *Ten Days that Shook the World* and a 1936 NSW ban on public performances of Odets’ anti-Nazi play *Till the Day I Die*—on advice from federal attorney-general Robert Menzies that it

would offend Germany.

World War II saw censorship of newspapers, radio and journals under the *National Security Regulations*. On one occasion in 1944, Commonwealth and NSW police were ordered to stop distribution of the *Daily Telegraph* and other Sydney newspapers that protested against censors by leaving blank spaces in articles to indicate deletions.

By the 1960s, the battles over censorship primarily occurred over allegedly sexually subversive material. In 1969 federal customs minister Don Chipp—who later founded the Australian Democrats—banned the book of Kenneth Tynan’s *Oh! Calcutta*. The same year, Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* became a prohibited import, with prosecutions by four state governments against local publishers or retailers in 1970.

More overt political censorship began to re-emerge during the 1990s. In 1997, the editors of the LaTrobe University student newspaper, *Rabelais*, lost an appeal in the Federal Court over the banning of an article entitled “The Art of Shoplifting”. The editors each faced jail terms of up to six years and/or fines up to \$72,000. The charges were finally dropped in 1999.

In February this year, the Classification Review Board banned Marc Ecko’s computer game “Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure”, ostensibly on the grounds that it incited graffiti-writing, “vandalism” and “youth crime”. The game’s message was anti-authoritarian—its scenario was a youth rebellion against a dictatorial local government that denied free expression.

Ruddock applied for the ban at the request of Queensland premier Peter Beattie, revealing the nervousness of both the Coalition government and the Labor party toward material that might encourage young people to challenge the official political establishment.



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