

Australian comedy team exposes APEC security hype

Patrick O'Connor
8 September 2007

A moment of absurdist satire in Sydney last Thursday exposed the farcical security measures imposed for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit as well as providing something of a popular rallying point for opposition to the military-police lockdown.

Members of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "The Chaser's War on Everything" television program assembled a fake motorcade involving three vehicles with dark tinted windows, Canadian flags attached, accompanied by dark suited men walking alongside. They travelled the same route as the motorcades of dignitaries of 21 countries and drove through two police checkpoints, before entering the APEC "restricted zone". Comedian Chas Licciardello, sitting inside one of the cars, was dressed as Osama bin Laden. Upon nearly reaching US President George Bush's hotel, he leapt out of the car, the motorcade turned around, and the team gave themselves up.

Chris Taylor of "The Chaser" later told the *Sydney Morning Herald* there was no particular reason they chose Canadian flags. "We just thought they'd be a country who the cops wouldn't scrutinise too closely, and who feasibly would only have three cars in their motorcade—as opposed to the 20 or so gas-guzzlers that Bush has brought with him."

According to one report, "The Chaser" expected their "motorcade" to be stopped at one of the many checkpoints surrounding the 5 kilometre-long and 2.8 metre-high metal fence encircling sections of central Sydney. Instead, they were waved through by police, who only realised what had happened when the vehicles stopped within metres of Sydney's Intercontinental Hotel. An ABC source told the *Daily Telegraph*: "Chas got out of a car dressed as Osama Bin Laden and said something like 'I'm an important

world leader, why don't I have a seat at the APEC table?' Apparently that was the first time the police realised it was not authentic and they swooped in and arrested everybody."

Eleven people from the ABC program were detained. Under special legislation introduced by the state Labor government for the APEC summit, they face six months imprisonment for entering a restricted area without justification. The potential penalty will increase to two years jail time if police allege that "circumstances of aggression exist in relation to the offence".

Police spokesmen angrily condemned "The Chaser". Their denunciations were clearly driven by a deep sense of embarrassment at the ease with which their unprecedented security measures were penetrated.

Fake ID badges worn by the mock secret service agents who ran alongside the "motorcade" read: "Chaser's War: It's pretty obvious this isn't a real pass". The vehicles in the cavalcade featured "APEC official vehicle" stickers, which read: "This vehicle belongs to 'The Chaser's War on Everything'. This dude likes trees and poetry and certain types of carnivorous plants excite him."

NSW Police Minister David Campbell managed to make himself look even sillier after the event by claiming a security success. "I think this reinforces that APEC security has been successful by the mere fact that 11 people have been arrested," he declared. "I offer my congratulations to those police officers for their diligent work."

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer also chimed in: "They were arrested, so that shows the security system works."

"The Chaser" team made an entirely appropriate mockery of the APEC security measures. The scale of

the operation—which involves about 5,000 police and soldiers and is budgeted to cost \$330 million—bears no relationship to any genuine threat to the safety of Bush or any of the other world leaders. Authorities have admitted they have no intelligence of a planned terrorist attack, and the official terror alert level has remained unaltered for the APEC summit.

The “bin Laden” prank has resonated with large sections of Sydney’s population, where the massive security clampdown is regarded with derision, contempt and outrage. Newspaper web site opinion polls, letters columns and radio talkback have recorded overwhelming support for “The Chaser” along with hostility to the Howard government and the police.

On the ABC’s web site, Francine wrote: “Well done Chasers!! You sum up all the frustration that we feel about having to put up with totally desperate and unnecessary ‘strong armed’ measures used by John Howard and the Liberal party in order to look like they are in control. Yes, it is our money the Federal Govt is wasting. Imagine if that money was put towards the poor and homeless, schools or hospitals in Sydney?”

On the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s site, Paul wrote: “If the threat is as serious as the security indicates the government is recklessly endangering the people of Sydney. None of the security is to protect average people—it is about isolating the ‘leaders’ from the general public. If the threat is exaggerated, as I strongly suspect, then they should be held to account for wasting so many resources and yet again lying to the public. Either way there is no justification for holding this event in Sydney and treating the entire population as a violent threat. What a farce.”

Many of the police actions are simply ridiculous. Restaurants and cafes in central Sydney have been told to remove knives and forks from outside tables in case they are used as weapons, while office workers in high-rise blocks have reportedly been instructed not to look at patrolling helicopters.

Other measures are highly provocative. Snipers have been placed on top of hotels in central Sydney, in helicopters now constantly patrolling the city, and in other vantage points, including atop the Sydney Opera House.

One anonymous person wrote on the *Herald*’s web site: “I have just walked through Martin Place, right in the APEC ‘stop & search’ zone and witnessed

something I hope never to see again in this country—a random person, who happened to be carrying a small backpack, being stopped and searched by no fewer than 6 NSW police officers. In the space of a single city block I counted no fewer than 32 police officers. None of this made me feel either secure or relaxed and comfortable. Why is it suddenly OK for police officers to demand to inspect journalists’ notebooks, to stop and search magistrates in Hyde Park (well outside the stop & search zone and therefore illegal) or to stop and search anyone at all. Why is it OK for police to instruct tourists, or anyone, to delete photos of a security fence? Why is it OK to have snipers on building tops in our largest city? What is it about this week that our personal freedoms and liberties should be set aside in the alleged name of security for a few?”

On Thursday, a police helicopter flew alongside the Sydney Harbour Bridge and a sniper inside pointed his gun at pedestrians. Amy McIntosh told ninemsn news: “He had a big sniper gun pointed out at all the pedestrians. I just couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I just felt it was really over the top. It was really loud and it was so close and I’ve never been that close to an airborne chopper before. Either they were looking for Osama Bin Laden or trying to intimidate the locals.”

In a chilling statement, Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione warned that “The Chaser” crew was lucky not to have been shot. “The reality is they put security services in a position where they might have had to take an action no one would want,” he declared. “We have snipers deployed around the city. They weren’t there for show, they mean business, that’s what they were there for.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact