

Australian Federal Police chief quits 18 months early

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Australian Federal Police (AFP) commissioner Mick Keelty this month announced he would step down in September, 18 months before the end of his second five-year contract, prompting media speculation that the Rudd government had pushed him to quit early.

Whether or not he was pushed to quit, Keelty had become a political liability—too deeply implicated in the former Howard government’s assault on basic legal and democratic rights in its so-called war on terror.

While welcoming his departure, an *Australian* editorial expressed gratitude for Keelty’s eight years in the past, saying he had “energised the force, creating a high profile and significantly boosting its strength and scope”.

Under the Howard government, Keelty became the public face of a far-reaching transformation of the AFP, accompanied by an unprecedented boosting of its size, resources, powers and functions, particularly in anti-terrorism, blocking refugee boats and involvement in overseas military operations.

When Keelty’s predecessor, Mick Palmer, retired in early 2001, the AFP was still a relatively obscure force with about 2,500 officers and staff. Today, it stands at 6,600—nearly treble the 2001 level—and its annual budget has more than doubled to \$1.2 billion.

The AFP was established by the Fraser government in 1979 following the 1978 Sydney Hilton Hotel bombing, which led to claims of a “new era of terrorism” in Australia. Compared to the larger state police forces, however, it remained low-key, mainly responsible for enforcing federal criminal law, policing the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and guarding diplomatic and other official buildings.

An early indication of the AFP’s transformed role came in late 1999, when the Howard government sent AFP officers to East Timor to help consolidate the Australian-led military intervention, although the numbers involved were initially limited—about 80.

In April 2001, the Howard government’s appointment of Keelty was regarded as unremarkable. Like Palmer before him, he had risen up through the ranks of the AFP, becoming Assistant Commissioner in 1995 and Deputy Commissioner in 1998.

Just five months later, in the midst of a federal election campaign,

the Howard government seized upon the arrival of the ship *Tampa*, which carried more than 400 asylum seekers, to launch its “Pacific Solution” of turning back refugee boats; and then used the September 11 attacks in the United States to join the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the accompanying domestic “war on terror”.

The AFP quickly became pivotal on both fronts. Between 2002 and 2005, the Howard government, backed by Labor, gave the AFP and its intelligence partner, ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) draconian powers. Based on a definition of terrorism so wide that it potentially covers many forms of political dissent, they can detain and interrogate people without charge, recommend the outlawing of organisations and initiate semi-secret trials of alleged terrorist suspects.

Keelty became a public advocate of these measures, defending the launching of highly-publicised raids and arrests of Muslims as the Howard government whipped up fears of terrorism to justify the legislation and its decision to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

At the same time, close relations were forged with the Indonesian police, particularly in operations against refugees and terrorist suspects. This was highlighted after 353 asylum seekers, including 150 children, drowned off Australia’s northern coast in October 2001 aboard a rickety wooden boat known only as the SIEV X. Keelty aggressively denied evidence that AFP agents had been involved in sabotaging refugee boats setting sail from Indonesia.

Keelty became involved in defending the government’s crimes. In 2002, he was among Australian officials, and government ministers who received, and covered-up, evidence that Mamdouh Habib, an Australian citizen, had been tortured while illegally detained in Pakistan, Egypt and Guantánamo Bay.

In March 2004, however, Keelty expressed concerns that by directing the “war” against Muslims, governments were in danger of inflaming terrorism. Interviewed by the ABC, he said it was necessary to “address the root causes” of terrorism, including economic hardship in poor countries. In another interview, he said the Madrid bombings indicated that the Iraq war had also made Australians likely terrorist targets, cutting across the Howard government’s denials of any such link.

According to officials, Howard “hit the wall” and phoned Keelty to force him to issue a “qualifying” statement. Keelty duly retreated,

claiming that he had been quoted “out of context”. From that point on, he closely followed the Howard government’s line.

Just before the 2004 clash with Keelty, the Howard government announced the formation of a new arm of the AFP, the para-military International Deployment Group (IDG). The IDG became central to the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)—a virtual neo-colonial occupation of that small Pacific Island country. In 2006, IDG personnel were involved the second Australian intervention in East Timor that resulted in the ouster of the Fretilin administration of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

While conducted in the name of providing “stability” and ensuring “law and order,” these operations are designed to enforce the strategic and economic interests of Australian capitalism. Having grown to 1,200 members, equipped with military-style weaponry, including armoured personnel carriers, the IDG provides a “rapid response” force to suppress popular unrest. That role was underscored in November 2006, when 64 IDG members were sent to Tonga after riots in the capital Nuku’olofa.

Smaller IDG forces have been sent to seven other countries—Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Cyprus, Cambodia, Vanuatu and Nauru. In addition, the AFP now boasts of trainers or exchange personnel in 27 countries, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Micronesia. In 2004, the AFP was involved in creating the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Co-operation, which trains police forces across Asia.

Addressing the National Press Club in 2006, Keelty spoke of “a new paradigm” in which the police became “the new deployable arm of Australian government policy”. Because of the political sensitivities involved in outright military interventions, the AFP would become a “pseudo-gendarmerie”.

Keelty first came under public criticism in 2005 when, in order to strengthen relations with its Indonesian counterparts, the AFP tipped them off to the arrival in Bali of nine young Australians recruited as drug couriers. The father of 19-year-old Scott Rush had alerted the AFP to their trip, and been reassured that the AFP would intervene to prevent his son taking part. Instead, the AFP ensured that they were arrested in Indonesia, where they faced the death penalty. Three remain on death row, with their executions imminent.

The police chief’s demise began in mid-2007 with the collapse of the Howard government’s cases against Indian-born doctor Mohamed Haneef and another terrorist suspect, Sydney medical student Izhar ul-Haque. Both frame-ups had featured police leaks to the media of false and prejudicial claims against the accused. But the prosecutions had to be dropped after lawyers and judges released information that exposed the lies and illegal methods employed by the AFP.

Keelty compounded the Haneef debacle by refusing to apologise to him and insisting for months that he remained a suspect. The AFP spent more than \$8 million and deployed, together with state police forces, over 600 officers in an attempt to produce evidence against the entirely innocent young man. The AFP chief even pursued an ethics claim against Haneef’s barrister Stephen Keim through Queensland’s Legal Services Commission for Keim’s decision to release a police

interview with Haneef to the media.

In January 2008, Keelty went further, calling for a media blackout on coverage of terrorism trials in order to prevent defendants and their lawyers appealing to the “Court of Public Opinion”. He insinuated that those responsible for exposing police frame-ups were aiding terrorism. “The erosion of trust and loss of support for our institutional governance and courts is precisely what our adversaries are attempting to achieve,” he declared.

Keelty’s concern was the sharp shift in public sentiment against the attacks on democratic rights being carried out in the name of protecting ordinary people from terrorism. This shift, which produced mounting demands for the release of another Australian citizen, David Hicks, from Guantánamo Bay, was deepened by the Haneef affair, and became a major factor in the defeat of the Howard government.

The Rudd government, which had promised a judicial inquiry into the Haneef case in a bid to “restore public confidence” in the anti-terrorism apparatus, publicly stood by Keelty, declaring that he retained the government’s full confidence and would remain in his post until 2011.

It was increasingly obvious, however, that Keelty’s credibility and political usefulness had been exhausted. The damage deepened last December when the Rudd government’s inquiry confirmed that the AFP had produced “no evidence” of any terrorist activity by Haneef.

Keelty’s departure will not stop the police and intelligence build-up, which Labor has unconditionally supported throughout. The expansion of the AFP has continued under Rudd, who has allocated funds for an extra 500 AFP positions over five years. Rudd’s attorney-general Robert McClelland commented that Keelty had resigned at a time when the AFP was moving into “a grand new phase of history”.

While the “war on terrorism” provided the initial pretext for a vast expansion of the powers of the state apparatus, Labor’s focus is now firmly on the global economic crisis, political disaffection and social unrest as the main threats to the existing order.

Keelty himself warned a national security conference last month that, “As the global financial crisis bites, it will increase feelings of marginalisation and isolation,” producing an increased risk of “demonstrations, strikes and riots”. He spoke of the need for new police strategies, already put in place by the Brown Labour government in Britain, to identify “hot spots” of “community crime and community dissent”.

The Labor government wants a fresh face to spearhead this “new phase.”



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