

Australian government boosts terror laws, while modifying “lexicon”

Mike Head
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While expanding the former Howard government’s “anti-terrorism” laws—which the Labor Party helped introduce between 2002 and 2006—the Rudd Labor government has moved to abandon the term “war on terrorism”. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is anxious to distance his government from the now largely discredited terminology that was used to justify the unprecedented police-state measures.

Attorney-General Robert McClelland last week foreshadowed a “package of reforms” that would include a new sweeping offence of “inciting violence” against an individual on the basis of race, religion or nationality. This would, he said, “expand the opportunity for prosecuting those who attempt to induce others, including vulnerable youths, to commit acts of politically motivated violence”.

The term “politically motivated violence” is a catch-all expression that can be applied to political opponents, extending the scope of the legislation further than the already broad definition of terrorism. “Inciting” can cover expressing sympathy or understanding for such conduct.

From September 2001, the Howard government joined hands with the Bush administration in the US and the Blair Labour government in Britain to whip up and exploit fears of terrorism in order to justify the criminal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and to introduce domestic laws that undermined the most fundamental democratic rights.

Former prime ministers John Howard and Tony Blair, and US president George Bush have, during the past period, all been ousted—in no small part due to popular opposition to their militarist and anti-democratic agendas. Now their replacements are continuing and deepening those agendas, albeit with the use of new

language.

Attorney-General McClelland announced earlier this month a “Lexicon of Terrorism” project to modify the official terminology. Describing the previous lexicon as “counter-productive,” McClelland said: “We need to use language that does not inadvertently glorify terrorism but rather describes it in terms of base criminal behaviour of the most reprehensible kind.”

McClelland said work on the lexicon project was being led by Victoria Police, in partnership with the Victorian government and the Australian Multicultural Foundation, which would conduct “community focus groups” to develop alternatives to such terms as “war” and “jihad”.

The project is based on those being implemented by the Obama administration and the Brown government, both of which have undertaken similar linguistic realignments, as they extend the powers put in place by their predecessors. In the US, Obama has dropped the term “war on terrorism” but continued its substance, including the “surge” in Afghanistan and military detention and trials. In Britain, government leaders have begun avoiding making explicit links between Islam and terrorism, while maintaining their commitment to the Afghanistan war and lengthy detention without trial.

Interviewed by the *Australian*, McClelland reiterated the Rudd government’s support for Howard’s laws. “I think a lot of good work has been done in Australia in terms of developing law enforcement capability, intelligence capability and, indeed, the legal framework,” McClelland said. “But I think the area of countering violent extremism has been neglected.”

By shifting the focus from terrorism to “extremism”, Labor is seeking to widen the applicability of the laws. The term “extremist” can be applied to numerous kinds

of groups and organisations. The legislation includes four types of detention without trial, executive powers to ban organisations, provisions for semi-secret trials and a definition of terrorism that is so wide that it covers many forms of political dissent and industrial action.

The Rudd government has not modified a single aspect of the laws, despite the public outcry, prior to the last federal election, over the detention of an innocent Indian-born doctor, Mohamed Haneef, the unlawful police coercion of a Muslim medical student, Izhar ul-Haque, and government support for the Bush administration's incarceration of Australian citizen David Hicks at Guantánamo Bay.

Instead, the government last month unveiled a bill to appoint a National Security Legislation Monitor to review the "effectiveness" of the counter-terrorism legislation, copying the British government's efforts to head off demands for the abolition of draconian powers.

In essence, the Rudd government is making a tactical shift to distance itself and the police and intelligence agencies from the damage done to the credibility of the terrorism measures by the Haneef, ul-Haque and Hicks affairs, while seeking to strengthen the security apparatus and legitimise the tearing up of basic rights.

Part of the adjustment is designed to forge closer links with selected "community leaders"—i.e., members of religious and ethnic elites—to better detect, monitor and combat disaffection through more intensive surveillance. "We should also be conscious of not alienating broad ethnic and religious groups by labelling them in a way that causes prejudice or leads to misunderstanding," McClelland said in his "lexicon" media announcement.

Like its US and British counterparts, the Rudd government is also broadening the focus of "national security", particularly to concentrate on the impact of the global financial crisis. McClelland elaborated on the shift in a March 23 speech to a National Security Australia conference.

The attorney-general said that at the "grass roots level", the Australian Federal Police had developed a National Community Engagement Strategy and "community liaison teams" to work closely with "communities at risk". He emphasised that a terrorist attack could emanate as much from "a disgruntled and

alienated Australian youth" as from an overseas terrorist organisation.

McClelland foreshadowed the establishment of two new agencies, a National Intelligence Coordination Committee of senior officials to "oversee and better integrate the full range of Australia's foreign, defence, security and law enforcement intelligence priorities," and a Crisis Coordination Centre to "improve support for government decision making during a crisis".



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