Australian Labor government releases terrorism "White Paper"

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The Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd last week released its long delayed Counter-Terrorism White Paper, outlining new anti-democratic measures to advance the "war on terror". The document's release was bound up with the government's political calculations. Originally due before the end of last year, the prime minister's office for months refused to explain the delayed unveiling of the White Paper or provide a new release date. Then, without prior warning, it was abruptly released last Tuesday.

The timing indicated that Rudd hoped to exploit concerns about terrorism as a political diversion. Labor is facing deteriorating opinion poll ratings and is coming under mounting pressure from the media and business establishment. The counter-terrorism announcement came just four days after Rudd terminated its $2.5 million home insulation subsidy scheme. The home insulation debacle has seen an intensified media campaign demanding that the government wind back its stimulus spending measures and institute a sustained austerity program.

In a manner reminiscent of his predecessor John Howard, Rudd attempted to stir up fears that ordinary Australians are threatened by "homegrown" terrorists. Taking charge of the media conference to release the White Paper, Rudd declared that "an attack could occur at any time". He insisted: "Australia now faces an increased terrorist threat from people born or raised in Australia who take inspiration from international jihadist narratives."

The Melbourne *Age*, in an article titled "How embattled PM played 'jihad' card", later reported that Rudd had personally intervened to "toughen" the wording of an earlier version of the policy document to stress the threat from "jihadist" and "homegrown terror". This was despite resistance from officials within his department and the Attorney General's Department who were concerned the language was inflammatory and counter-productive.

Rudd warned against underestimating the supposed threat posed by terrorists. "There's a bit of a danger that we all get numbed to the terrorist threat," he declared at the press conference. "It's a word which is used, and people have become so used to it over the last near decade, that it no longer bites home."

In reality it is not excessive use of the word "terrorism" which is to blame for the failure of security warnings to "bite home", but rather a heightened scepticism regarding the political manipulation of the "war on terrorism". Cases including that of Guantánamo Bay detainee David Hicks and the framed Dr Mohamed Haneef have ensured that official warnings of heightened terrorist danger, such as that now issued by Rudd, are greeted with widespread and justified disbelief and cynicism.

Rudd provided no evidence in support of his claim that there was an increased risk from Australian born or raised terrorists. To the extent that such a risk does exist, the Rudd government and the political establishment as a whole bears responsibility. Canberra's involvement in the US-led neo-colonial interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries is fuelling deep anger and resentment that potentially can be exploited by Islamic fundamentalists.

Despite the government's best efforts, the attempted scare campaign largely fell flat. There were no blaring headlines or editorials. The media featured instead the remarks of those who criticised it as a diversion from the government's political troubles. The Australian National University's director of terrorism studies, Clive Williams,

commented: "The government needs something to distract from its problems."

The White Paper nevertheless contains disturbing new features. It proclaims that terrorism has become a "persistent and permanent feature of Australia's security environment". Like the Obama administration in the US—which has just backed the extension of the 2001 USA Patriot Act—the Rudd government is cementing in place all the unprecedented powers given to the police and intelligence agencies. Originally these provisions were justified as emergency "wartime" requirements. Now they are being reinforced for the indefinite future.

The document reiterates the government's commitment to retaining all the previous measures, including "preventive" detention without trial. It also foreshadows strengthening legislation to maintain "a legal regime that provides effective powers for our agencies". A new multi-agency Counter-Terrorism Control Centre is to be established within the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation in order to "set and manage counter-terrorism priorities", "identify intelligence requirements" and coordinate the official collection and distribution of counter-terrorism information.

In addition, a biometric-based visa system will be introduced to collect and check fingerprints and facial images from visa applicants, initially from 10 unnamed countries. The targeting of people based on their nationality alone is setting the stage for security measures based on racial and religious profiling. New airport screening measures will be also implemented, including full-body scanners.

The White Paper declares the government's preparedness to use military callout laws that were introduced with bipartisan support in 2001. This legislation permits the mobilisation of troops to deal with "domestic violence," effectively overturning long-standing restrictions on deploying the armed forces against civilians on home soil. The paper—which features numerous photographs of military personnel engaged in domestic counter-terrorism exercises—states that the "government retains the option of calling upon the full breadth of Defence capabilities if necessary".

While the prime minister singled out Islamic fundamentalists as the "key threat," the White Paper points to wider concerns in ruling circles. "[I]n the future new terrorist threats could manifest themselves in Australia, either as a by-product of events overseas or as a result of a political grievance within Australia," it states. "There will always be the disaffected and disempowered, often but not always at the fringes of communities or the followers of radical ideologies, who mistakenly see advantages in the use of terrorist tactics."

The White Paper also notes that "social and economic hardship can lead individuals, families and even communities to be more receptive to extremist ideologies that might promise more attractive alternatives". These vague references to "extremist ideologies" that might appeal to the "disaffected and disempowered", particularly in conditions of "social and economic hardship", highlights the fact that the "anti-terror" measures are not simply directed against Islamic fundamentalists.

The official definition of terrorism is already so broad—it refers to threats of personal harm or property damage motivated by an ideological agenda to intimidate governments or sections of the public—that it extends to street demonstrations and political strike action. And as demonstrated by last month's jailing of five Sydney men for up to 28 years in jail on terrorism conspiracy charges, the laws can be used to essentially punish beliefs and opinions that are hostile to the operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Rudd government welcomed the severe sentences (see: "Unprecedented sentences in Australian terrorism trial").

One of the major reasons for Labor's election in 2007 was growing unease and opposition to the Howard government's police-state measures and their use against innocent men like Dr Haneef. Now, Rudd is attempting to play the terrorism card, not only inciting divisive and racist sentiments, but also preparing to suppress the social and political unrest that will be generated by the next stage of the global economic crisis.

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