

Australian government steps up secret surveillance of protests

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Documents released to Fairfax newspapers under freedom of information laws have shed light on the Labor government's increasing use of the security apparatus built up during the "war on terrorism" to monitor protesters and anyone else regarded as a threat to Australian corporate interests.

The documents, reported last week, show that after a series of environmental protests in 2009, Resources and Energy Minister Martin Ferguson requested additional surveillance of "issues-related activism," in order to assist energy companies and police to combat "disruptions to critical energy infrastructure."

Agreeing to the request, Robert McClelland, then attorney-general, confirmed that the Australian Federal Police (AFP) "continually monitors the activities of issues-motivated groups and individuals who may target establishments through direct action, or action designed to disrupt or interfere with essential services."

McClelland also emphasised the role of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) "in intelligence-gathering, analysis and advice in relation to protest activity [that] focuses on actual, or the potential for, violence."

As a result of the "counter-terrorism" legislation introduced over the past decade, ASIO and the AFP, which work in close collaboration, have extensive powers, including to secretly search premises, intercept telecommunications, hack into computers and detain people for interrogation or investigation.

Both agencies have approximately tripled in size since 2001, giving them unprecedented levels of

personnel and resources. The documents reveal that the AFP also contracts out some of its Internet surveillance to a commercial operator, the National Open Source Intelligence Centre, which specialises in monitoring "radical activism" and conducting "threat analysis" for corporate clients.

Other sources cited by the newspapers indicated that operations against environmental protest groups may include infiltration and provocation by undercover police agents—methods that have been used in several terrorism prosecutions in Australia since 2002. AFP officers told the Fairfax journalist that "on very rare occasions, the AFP conducts covert operations targeting individuals who may be members of groups where specific intelligence exists relating to criminal activities by these individuals."

The documents show that Ferguson's department has an Energy Security Branch, which warned major electricity providers, the Australian Energy Market Operator, Macquarie Generation and TransGrid, of a planned "peaceful mass action" at the coal-burning Bayswater power station, north of Sydney, in 2010. On that occasion, 73 protesters were arrested and fined \$250, before most convictions were overturned on appeal.

The material underscores Labor's re-direction of the resources of the intelligence and security agencies to focus on political dissent and social unrest. Last September, AFP chief Tony Negus warned of rising disaffection in Australia, particularly among young people, and revealed that Prime Minister Julia Gillard had been involved in discussions about preparations to deal with riots similar to those that had just occurred across Britain. (See: "In wake of British riots,

Australian government preparing for youth unrest”)

Despite government claims that the Australian economy is shielded from the global financial turmoil, there is evident nervousness about the economic and political prospects, amid mounting job cuts, inequality and social distress. The eruption of tumultuous social struggles in 2011, beginning with the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, has shaken ruling circles and led to stepped-up surveillance and preparations for state repression.

ASIO chief, David Irvine, the Director-General of Security, told a Safeguarding Australia Conference last September: “We can all see change and fluidity in world events that matter to our security swirling around us... changes in the fortunes of war in Afghanistan and ongoing unrest in Iraq... groundswells of change in the ‘Arab Spring’... widespread unrest in Syria, Yemen and some Gulf states.” Irvine also spoke of “economic shocks closer to home,” “unprecedented riots and lawlessness in the UK” and “the way the world will react to international debt crises.” He described the list of dangers as “endless.”

Irvine said terrorism remained the agency’s key task, but changes in the security situation were driving a “whole-of-government” move to “recalibrate and reprioritize” the security posture.

The documents published last week point to the growing use of the security forces to directly protect major business operations and interests. This is in line with the Labor government’s broadening of the concept of “national security” to include the defence of “economic prosperity.” (See: “Australian government expands spy agency’s powers”)

ASIO now works closely with big business at the highest levels. The agency’s annual report for 2010-11 highlighted its Business Liaison Unit, which was established in 2005: “ASIO actively built links with industry, business and research institutions and provided protective security advice in relation to their presence and activities in Australia and overseas.” ASIO had also “engaged in industry events, providing advice on corporate security,” and “coordinated five high-level meetings between company chief executives and the Director-General of Security.”

At the close of 2010-11, the Business Liaison Unit’s secure website—available free-of-charge to

subscribers—contained 260 reports, providing information to 950 corporations and government agencies, including “utilities, oil and gas, transport, and banking and finance” companies.

Senator Scott Ludlam, a spokesman for the Greens—who provide the parliamentary votes to maintain Gillard’s minority Labor government—criticised the spying on environmental protesters as a “deliberate abuse” and “diversion of resources” by Energy Minister Ferguson away from the proper role of the security agencies “who have better things to do than follow the dictates of foreign coal and energy corporations.”

In reality, the latest revelations underline the essential function of the security and intelligence apparatus as a whole. It is a repressive force, devoted to defending the interests of the corporate elite, at the expense of the basic democratic rights of ordinary people. Its operations are intensifying in a new period of global economic and political instability and emerging working-class struggles.



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