

After Boston bombing, Australian media escalates “war on terror”

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The response of the Australian media and political establishment to the state of siege imposed on Boston following the April 15 bombings is a clear indication that the ruling elites are prepared to use the same kind of anti-democratic methods in Australia.

In the extensive media coverage, the unparalleled military-police lockdown of a major American city in order to hunt down a single 19-year-old youth allegedly responsible for the bomb blasts was barely mentioned, let alone criticised. It was the photographs, rather than the words, that gave a glimpse of what was taking place—heavily-armed police and national guard troops in combat gear, armoured humvees patrolling the streets, “suspects” being handcuffed.

The military and police-state methods that have been used for more than a decade to terrorise the populations of Afghanistan and Iraq—curfews, house-to-house searches, roadblocks, the shutdown of transport—are now being deployed in the United States. Yet the imposition of what is tantamount to martial law in Boston and the trampling on democratic rights is not questioned in the slightest by Australian politicians or in the media.

Instead, the Boston bombings have seized upon to justify the reactionary agenda of the ruling class in Australia, including the further beefing up of the intelligence agencies and police. As on every other issue, the federal Labor government immediately took its cue from Washington. Within hours of the bomb blasts, long before any evidence had emerged, Foreign Minister Bob Carr was already raising the spectre of terrorism, declaring that it was “legitimate to be concerned... that this does represent a domestic terrorist strike.”

The media, with Murdoch’s *Australian* in the lead, took up the issue. Its editorial on April 22, entitled

“The people of Boston prevail,” hailed the “grit and resilience” of the people of Boston, which provided “an inspiring lesson in how to confront terrorism.” There was no mistaking that it was not the “people of Boston,” but rather the massive military manhunt that was being praised. “Optimism that after Osama bin Laden was killed, terrorism would go into decline was misplaced. The need for vigilance is as important now as ever,” the editorial concluded.

An article in Murdoch’s tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, on April 19 railed against the Gillard government for allegedly reducing the budgets for the Australian intelligence services by \$80 million over the coming four years. In reality, the funding for the six civilian and military agencies has massively expanded over the past decade, trebling to over a billion dollars by 2010 and enabling a huge expansion of staff. The Boston bombs, the writer declared, “should be wake-up calls to governments who think they can use the public perception of reduced threat levels to cut budgets from the intelligence agencies.”

The Chechen background of the alleged Boston bombers is also being used to justify draconian measures against immigrants and refugees. Under the Labor government’s “border protection” regime, asylum seekers arriving by boat are held indefinitely in remote detention camps. Even those deemed to be refugees are subject to assessments by the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the country’s internal spy agency. Currently 55 Sri Lankan Tamils are in a legal black hole following adverse assessments—still detained and unable to challenge the secret findings.

In its April 22 editorial, “When migrants turn terrorist,” the *Australian* went one step further. Declaring that the Boston bombings posed “significant

questions for every country processing migrants and asylum seekers,” it insisted that “future security measures must focus more on identifying and intercepting likely terrorists.” Arguing that “authorities, including those in Australia, must overcome their nervousness about profiling,” it declared: “There is nothing discriminatory in identifying cohorts from which terrorists might be recruited and concentrating finite resources on tracking their movements.”

In other words, entire immigrant communities should be targeted by the police and intelligence agencies, and ASIO’s screening of immigrants should be further tightened. There is no limit to the “cohorts” who would be subject to systematic surveillance, harassment and interrogation—Chechens, Sri Lankan Tamils, virtually anyone from the Middle East, including longstanding Australian residents. This is an open-ended recipe for whipping up prejudice and justifying persecution.

Just as politically significant is the support in what passes for the liberal media in Australia for strengthening the police-state apparatus. An editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on April 21 declared: “The capture [of the surviving suspect] should provide reassurance about the skills of law enforcement officials. But the lessons to improve security will have to be learnt. Chances are people in the US and Australia will be asked to be on heightened alert and accept tougher security checks at public events.”

The newspaper’s only caveat was to urge caution in branding entire communities as a threat. “Guilt by association is dangerous. Policy by fear is unwarranted. The Boston marathon bombs, while tragic, are not an excuse for witch-hunts,” it declared. However, the editorial had nothing to say about the state of siege that was imposed on Boston and made no criticism of the “skills of law enforcement officials” in riding roughshod over basic legal and democratic rights.

Likewise, the Greens have made no statement on the Boston bombings. And the Australian civil liberties fraternity has been remarkable only for its complete silence on the abrogation of basic democratic rights in Boston.

This response has a significance of its own. The entire political establishment is complicit in erecting the scaffolding of a police-state in Australia. Under the rubric of the “war on terrorism,” the state now has powers to detain without trial, conduct secret

interrogations, outlaw organisations and hold semi-secret trials. Surveillance and search powers have been augmented. Control orders and “preventative detention” can be imposed.

Moreover, the federal government has the power to impose a military state of siege akin to the Boston lockdown. Under legislation passed, without public debate, for the 2000 Sydney Olympics and extended in 2006, the prime minister, or two other “authorising ministers” acting together, can in the case of a “sudden and extraordinary emergency” activate the armed forces. The military will then have the right to seal off designated areas, establish road blocks, issue orders to civilians, seize property, search premises without warrants, detain people and shoot to kill.

The scope for the use of these powers is exceptionally broad and vague—a supposed threat to “Commonwealth interests” or the danger of “domestic violence” that is beyond the capacity of a state or territory. “Terrorism” is simply the convenient pretext for the establishment of authoritarian mechanisms that can be used to deal with popular opposition and resistance to the regressive agenda of militarism and austerity being imposed in Australia, as in the United States.



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