

Australian government ramps up NSA-connected surveillance apparatus

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The Labor government has presided over a vast expansion of the Australian intelligence agencies' surveillance operations, international and domestic, in close collaboration with the US National Security Agency (NSA) and other intelligence bodies.

Canberra is deeply implicated in the NSA's PRISM program, involving the illegal interception of data on the servers of major Internet companies, including Apple, Google and Facebook.

Following NSA contractor Edward Snowden's courageous exposure of the scale of illegal US spying operations, the *Age* reported last Thursday on Australia's role in the PRISM Internet and other surveillance methods. According to the newspaper, so much American data was forwarded to Australian intelligence officials—described as a “data deluge”—that the government ordered the building of a new facility for the secretive Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), the Australian equivalent of the NSA. The additional infrastructure, still under construction, was needed to process what defence intelligence officials told the *Age* was “huge volumes” of “immensely valuable” information.

“We are overwhelmingly dependent on intelligence obtained by the NSA and the US intelligence community more broadly,” an unnamed intelligence official told the *Age*.

Australia is part of the “Five Eyes” group—also involving the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand—which was formed in the late 1940s to jointly monitor international communications. Australia also hosts key US-operated signals intelligence facilities, including Pine Gap and North West Cape. In 2012, the Labor government awarded the Order of Australia to James Clapper, US Director of National Intelligence, for his “determined advocacy of the United States-

Australia intelligence relationship.”

In 2009, the government exempted the new DSD facility, being added to an existing military-intelligence telecommunications centre in Canberra, from review by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works. The stated reason was that scrutiny “would not be in the public interest.”

The *Age* article was authored by Philip Dorling, a journalist with close links to the Australian intelligence establishment. Officials told him that NSA-PRISM data had covered issues related to “Australian citizens involved in fighting in Syria” and “Chinese internal political and economic developments.” US signals intelligence was also described as “absolutely critical” to the Australian government's successful campaign to win a two-year United Nations Security Council seat.

“Without intelligence support, overwhelmingly provided by US capabilities, we would not have won the seat,” a Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade officer reportedly said.

No further details on this issue have emerged—but the question immediately arises, was Kevin Rudd, who launched the UN Security Council bid, and then Julia Gillard, involved in illegal activities as part of the diplomatic campaign? Spying on diplomats is prohibited under international law. Was US intelligence used to win votes via blackmail or to sabotage rival bids?

Unanswered questions remain over the extent of Australian intelligence operations directed against Australian citizens. However, there is no reason to believe that domestic surveillance in Australia is any less extensive than that conducted by the NSA within the United States.

The *Age* referred to PRISM and “similar capabilities” in relation to Internet service providers at home,

without elaborating.

Unnamed officials emphasised to the newspaper that the DSD “complies with legal requirements and ministerial guidelines that limit reporting in relation to Australians, other than those of specific security or foreign intelligence interest.” This remarkable formulation is one to which any fully fledged police state could readily subscribe—surveillance of citizens is subject to laws and guidelines, except for those deemed to be of “security or foreign intelligence interest.”

This category obviously applies to WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange, with the Labor government playing a key role in assisting the US-led vendetta against the Australian citizen for his role in publishing classified American state documents proving US war crimes and other violations of international law.

Australian police agencies collect internet and phone metadata at nearly twice the level, per capita, of their American counterparts. Law enforcement bodies, i.e., excluding the domestic spy agency Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), issued 293,501 requests for telecommunications data in 2011–12. That was without warrant or judicial oversight, as permitted by the Telecommunications Interception and Access Act.

The government previously attempted to pass legislation compelling Internet service providers to store all on-line data for two years, to allow retrospective data sweeps by intelligence and police officers. It also amended the telecommunications interception laws to allow the intelligence agencies, including the DSD and ASIO, to monitor anyone, including Australian citizens, considered a threat to “national economic well-being,” “security” or “foreign relations.”

The Gillard government has flatly refused to comment on any aspect of the NSA revelations or the collaboration of Australian intelligence agencies. Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus again insisted that he would never talk about “national security” matters, while declaring: “Our intelligence activities and intelligence relationship with close allies, including the United States, protect our country from threats such as terrorism, foreign espionage and cyber intrusions.”

Gillard has not issued any comment. She is aided and abetted by a compliant press corps that has not put a single question to her about Edward Snowden, PRISM

or the *Age*’s revelations on DSD spying.

Opposition leader Tony Abbott has similarly remained silent, with his shadow communications minister Malcolm Turnbull meeting with US ambassador Jeff Bleich, “to try to get a clearer understanding of exactly what we’re talking about here.”

The Greens, who have played the key role in propping up the minority Labor government for the past three years, are now posturing as opponents of its surveillance operations. They are again promoting draft legislation mandating warrants for domestic data interception—a measure that would do nothing to neither stem Australian collaboration with the PRISM operation, nor pose any obstacle to continued domestic surveillance with a judicial imprimatur. The proposed measures are part of what the Greens communications spokesman Senator Scott Ludlam previously described as the need to reach a “healthy balance” between privacy concerns and “genuine security.”

The vast state surveillance capacities developed under the Gillard government have nothing to do with the security of working people in Australia. As in the US, dictatorial forms of rule have been prepared by the Australian ruling elite in response to the escalating social and economic crisis it confronts. The old parliamentary forms of rule and democratic norms are incompatible with the extreme social polarisation and new period of wars and militarism that has emerged.



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