

Snowden document confirms US-backed mass surveillance in Australia

Mike Head

3 December 2013

Australia's intelligence apparatus mines the telecommunications data of ordinary Australians, and hands over the material to the US and its closest allies, according to the latest leaked document from Edward Snowden, partly published by the *Guardian Australia* web site yesterday.

The document obtained by the former US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor confirms that the electronic surveillance agency, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), monitors the domestic population, as well as the people and governments of many Asian countries.

Despite Australian legislation supposedly restricting the ASD's internal spying, the agency hands over to the NSA and its global partners so-called metadata of the phone calls, texts, emails, on-line address books and social media posts of millions of people.

This exposure of mass surveillance follows the recent revelations, also from documents leaked by Snowden, that the ASD, then known as the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), tapped the phone calls of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and that Australian embassies throughout Asia operate as electronic listening posts for the US-led spying network.

According to the partial extracts made public by the *Guardian Australia*, the DSD agreed to share "bulk metadata" at a top-level conference of the "Five Eyes" intelligence agencies—from the US, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—hosted by Britain's GCHQ spy agency in April 2008.

"DSD can share bulk, unselected, unminimised metadata as long as there is no intent to target an Australian national," notes from the conference say. This formal caveat—a nod to legal restrictions on domestic spying—was regarded as no real barrier. As the

notes state: "Unintentional collection is not viewed as a significant issue."

"Metadata" is the information that everyone automatically generates whenever they use electronic technology, from the date, time and recipient of a phone call, to the location from which an email is sent, and lists of phone, email and social media contacts. Metadata can present a detailed picture of anyone's life, including their political activity.

The "Five Eyes" officials ruled out limiting the intelligence-sharing to exclude "medical, legal, religious or restricted business information, which may be regarded as an intrusion of privacy." The conference agreed to "not seek to set any automatic limitations."

Australia's representatives paid lip service to the requirement, under Australia's Intelligence Services Act, for a ministerial warrant to be obtained to specifically produce intelligence on an Australian person.

The note taker at the meeting wrote that "if a 'pattern of life' search detects an Australian then there would be a need to contact DSD and ask them to obtain a ministerial warrant to continue." A "pattern of life" search involves building up a portrait of an individual's daily activities.

The ministerial warrant system itself points to the intimate involvement of successive Australian governments in the domestic spying system—it allows for surveillance by ministerial decree, without a judicial warrant.

It is technically possible to strip out the metadata of Australian nationals from the bulk collection methods used by the Five-Eyes countries, but the document shows that Australia's intelligence services instead offered to leave the data in its raw state.

The April 2008 document adds to what is already

known, from previous Snowden leaks, about the vast collection of electronic data by the DSD-ASD, both domestically and throughout the Asia-Pacific region, as part of the NSA's worldwide operations.

One document showed how critical the ASD's eavesdropping facilities within Australia are to an NSA program code-named X-Keyscore, which collects electronic data for storage in massive data banks (see: "Snowden confirms Australian agencies involved in NSA global spying").

Another document revealed that Telstra, Australia's largest telecom, signed a secret agreement in November 2001 to ensure that US intelligence agencies had unrestricted access to all electronic communications carried in its cables from the Asia Pacific to the US (see: "Australia: Telstra facilitates US electronic spying").

A further document recorded that in just one day, in January 2012, a previously undisclosed NSA program "harvested" 712,336 email address books globally, of which 311,113, or more than 40 percent, were provided by the ASD (see: "Australian agency integrated into NSA spying operations").

This latter document provided some indication of the enormous scale of the spying that was discussed in 2008. It underscores the fraud of efforts by the Abbott government, the Labor opposition and the mass media, especially the Murdoch outlets, to dismiss the latest document as an "unverified draft."

Both the government and Labor immediately came together in a bipartisan front to deny any knowledge of illegal spying on the population, but the document points to intelligence-gathering and swapping on a vast scale. This could only occur with the full authorisation of successive Liberal-National and Labor governments, which have sanctioned the Five-Eyes arrangements since World War II.

Just last year, the previous Labor government sought to boost the spying. It unveiled a plan to require that everything that Australians do on-line, from phone and Skype calls to Twitter and Facebook posts, would be stored for up to two years so that the security agencies could mine the data. A public outcry eventually forced Labor to withdraw the proposal.

Desperate to counter the political damage of Snowden's latest revelation, Prime Minister Tony Abbott yesterday dropped the political establishment's

customary stance of refusing to confirm or deny spying allegations. He falsely described the metadata as "billing data" and claimed: "You can only get access to the content of communications by warrant, under our system." In reality, the metadata provides an electronic fingerprint of people's lives, and ministerial warrants have only rubber-stamped the surveillance.

Abbott and Attorney-General George Brandis also sought to justify the electronic data-mining as being needed to combat terrorism. But the sheer volume of material being collected by the intelligence apparatus and its global partners cannot be explained by concerns about small numbers of potential terrorists. It is directed against the entire population.

Moreover, the ASD's operations are critical to the Obama administration's military and strategic "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific region to combat China's rising economic influence. Australian Defence Minister David Johnston, the minister responsible for the ASD, told a recent defence industry forum that the Five-Eyes partners would press on with their activities despite the worsening Snowden disclosures. Johnston said the network had "invested far too much in this space to allow the event [the leaks] ... to even contemplate a backward step."

The Greens, the third party of the political establishment, sought to divert the popular concern over Snowden's exposures by calling for a parliamentary inquiry "into surveillance overreach by these agencies." Any such inquiry, as with previous parliamentary reports, would only serve to cover up the mass surveillance.

Far from "overreach," the monitoring of the activities of ordinary working class people, as well as regional governments, demonstrates the essential purpose of the intelligence apparatus. Its function is, above all, to support the war preparations being made by Washington and its Australian ally, and monitor the political and social discontent being produced by this militarism and the ever-deepening austerity measures being imposed on the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact