

Australian government preparing attack on citizenship rights

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The Abbott government is moving to ramp up the “war on terrorism”—the primary vehicle for the unprecedented erosion of core legal and democratic rights over the past decade—and to deepen that assault by introducing new powers to revoke Australian citizenships.

Addressing 200 police and intelligence officials at the inaugural Interpol Global Security and Counter-Terrorism Convention in Sydney last Tuesday, Attorney-General George Brandis accused the previous Labor government of downplaying the “threat of terrorism” in Australia. He claimed that the conflict in Syria posed new risks of “home-grown” extremism in Australia, with citizens returning home after fighting there.

At a media conference, Brandis refused to confirm or deny that the government is planning legislative changes to strip citizenship from dual nationals fighting in Syria. A week earlier, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison signalled the move, along the lines of powers increasingly being exercised by the British government.

Morrison said the government was “looking right now” at cancelling citizenships to prevent alleged combatants from returning home, saying it would “definitely want to have things of that order to enable you to protect the country from the incursion of that sort of violent and unhelpful views.”

This proposal, first advanced by the former Labor government, underscores the political establishment’s willingness to abolish even the most basic political and civil right—citizenship. Citizenship carries with it a series of essential rights, including to vote, reside, travel, and access healthcare, welfare, education, housing and other social programs.

If people can be stripped of citizenship, and barred from returning to Australia, for having “violent and

unhelpful views,” the precedent could apply to anyone whose views were considered politically threatening.

There is an obvious element of sheer hypocrisy in the government’s plans to use the Syrian fighting as the pretext for a new supposed crackdown on terrorism. The US and its allies, including Australia, are backing Al Qaeda-linked Islamic fundamentalist forces in Syria, as part of a violent “regime change” operation to oust the Assad government.

Last year, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) estimated that about 200 Australians were participating in the Syrian war, mainly joining Sunni fundamentalist outfits such as the al-Nusra Front. These same elements are now said to be the source of a dire terrorist threat to Australia, just as was said previously about Al Qaeda, whose origins lay in the US-led operation in the 1980s to oust the former Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan.

Under anti-democratic measures strengthened via the “anti-terrorist” laws passed since 2001, powers already exist to cancel the citizenship of anyone convicted of a serious offence committed before being granted citizenship, or of making a false statement to obtain citizenship.

In Britain, the government, without a court order, can revoke the citizenship of anyone with dual citizenship of another country, on the arbitrary basis that it would be “conducive to the public good.” Over the past three years, the Conservative-Liberal coalition government has imposed 37 “deprivation of citizenship orders” and is now pushing through an amendment to allow citizenship to be stripped from anyone who is not a dual citizen, thus rendering them stateless.

At present, Australian passports (but not citizenship) can be cancelled for vague political reasons, such as being “likely to engage in conduct that might prejudice

the security of Australia or a foreign country.” These powers have been used to revoke the passports of more than 50 citizens since 2001. Those targeted are barred from even examining the reasons for the passport seizure, because the government and ASIO claim that would also compromise “national security.”

Australians convicted of going to fight, train or recruit in selected overseas conflicts can also be jailed for up to 20 years. Under the vague provisions of the Crimes (Incursions and Recruitment) Act, people can be charged for even supporting or fund-raising for a “hostile activity” in a foreign state, unless the government sanctions that activity.

After taking no action for two years against people going to Syria to fight for the overthrow of the Assad regime, the Australian Federal Police arrested two men in Sydney last month on such charges.

Brandis made a series of sensationalised claims in opening the Interpol convention. “In Australia, like many other countries, we are witnessing a growing trend of citizens travelling offshore to engage in, or support terrorist activities or conflict,” he said. They posed “a significant national security risk,” he insisted, “including the ability to conduct an attack on Australian soil, radicalise others and impart knowledge and skills gained offshore.”

The attorney-general accused the former Labor government of downgrading the terrorist threat in its 2013 National Security Strategy, which signalled a shift to focus on the alleged security dangers posed by China, in line with the Obama administration’s Asian “pivot” against China.

In reality, Labor’s 2013 document perpetuated the “war on terrorism,” asserting that terrorism remained a “serious threat.” It endorsed the decade of illegal US-led wars, Australian military interventions, boosting of police and intelligence powers and attacks on democratic rights carried out after 9/11, on the pretext of combating terrorism.

Now the Abbott government, which is going even further than Labor in committing Australia to the US preparations for a war against China, is re-igniting efforts to whip up public fears of terrorism in order to justify a deeper offensive against citizenship and other basic democratic rights.

In his speech, Brandis hailed the boosting of the resources of the intelligence and federal police agencies

after 2001—their budgets and staffing tripled in the following decade—and the introduction of “modest but important” anti-terrorism legislation.

These laws erected the framework for a police-state, including secret interrogations, detention without trial, denial of bail, closed-door trials, removal of the right to remain silent and reversals of the presumption of innocence. Brandis’s reference to these unprecedented provisions as “modest” must be taken as a warning that even more authoritarian measures are being prepared amid the mounting class and political tensions produced by intensifying austerity measures and militarism.



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