

Australian attorney-general accuses Snowden of “endangering lives”

Mike Head
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Attorney-General George Brandis this week stepped up the Australian government’s vilification of Edward Snowden. Brandis declared in parliament—without the slightest evidence—that the US National Security Agency whistleblower “put lives, including Australian lives, at risk” by leaking NSA documents that lifted the lid on the global mass surveillance being conducted by the US and its allies.

Brandis amplified last month’s denunciations by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who declared that Snowden was a “traitor” who “betrayed his country” and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who claimed that Snowden had committed “unprecedented treachery” (see “Australian government joins international witch-hunt of Edward Snowden”).

Addressing the Senate on Tuesday, the attorney-general further declared that Snowden, “through criminal conduct and treachery, has put Australian lives at risk.” When journalists asked Brandis to produce evidence to support his allegation, his office failed to answer repeated requests for any details.

Brandis’s accusation is particularly sinister because it directly aids the intensifying witch-hunt of lies, smears and threats being orchestrated by the US media and political establishment. The unsubstantiated claim that Snowden “endangered lives” could form the basis for the trumped-up espionage charges being prepared by the Obama administration, accompanied by declarations by unnamed US officials that Snowden should be assassinated.

In the reactionary court martial of another courageous US whistleblower, Chelsea (Bradley) Manning, who was brutalised in a military brig for nearly three years, then sentenced to 35 years in prison, the Obama administration’s prosecutors made the same allegation. They demanded that Manning be jailed for the

maximum possible term of 136 years, but were forced to concede, under cross-examination, that not a single example of individual harm caused by Manning’s leaks could be produced.

The clear intent of such allegations, also levelled against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, is not only to silence these young men, but to intimidate anyone else considering exposing Washington’s criminal activities. The only “offence” committed by Manning and Assange was to reveal some of the war crimes perpetrated in Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its allies, including Australia, such as indiscriminate killings, torture and renditions. Snowden has demonstrated that the US intelligence apparatus and its partners, including the Australian agencies, monitor the phone and Internet communications of hundreds of millions of people around the world, as well as those of targeted government leaders, such as Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

The Abbott government’s denunciations are almost identical to those issued by the previous Labor government against Assange, an Australian citizen, directly assisting the Obama administration’s campaign to railroad him to jail on espionage charges. Prime Minister Julia Gillard branded Assange’s publication of diplomatic cables exposing the coup plots and other crimes of US imperialism as “grossly irresponsible and illegal.” Her attorney-general, Robert McClelland, asserted that WikiLeaks could “prejudice the safety of people” named in the cables.

Brandis issued his allegations against Snowden while denouncing Greens Senator Scott Ludlam for publishing an article on the *Guardian* web site supporting an international campaign to protest against so-called government surveillance “overkill.” Ludlam’s article was a tepid call for a more informed

“debate” about the “invasive and unnecessary” spying program. It did not explicitly call for the defence of Snowden. Nevertheless, Brandis nevertheless condemned the Greens senator for “making a hero of this man.”

Ludlam’s immediate response was a grovelling appeal to the government to support supposed “reforms,” designed to sanctify Australia’s surveillance laws. Following Brandis’s tirade, Ludlam asked him: “Senator Brandis, are you aware of, and have you or your office evaluated, any of the proposals for serious law reform put to President Obama in the case of the indiscriminate surveillance by the NSA?”

Far from reining in, let alone ending, the NSA’s dragnet surveillance, the purpose of Obama’s measures is to legitimise it. As the Obama-appointed panel heading the surveillance “reform” initiative said last month, the focus of its work would be “maintaining the ability of the intelligence community to do what it needs to do” (see: “Obama administration announces new deal with tech companies on NSA spying”).

In the same vein, Ludlam appealed for his fellow senators to support a Senate committee inquiry initiated by the Greens into Australia’s telecommunications interception laws. The purpose of that inquiry, as Ludlam told the Senate in December, is not to be “hostile” but to make “urgent” proposals to update the legislation to cope with advances in technology.

The inquiry, for which the Labor Party also voted, is not about halting blanket surveillance, but rather is to modernise and boost the powers of the security apparatus. At the same time, it aims to head off growing public concern ignited by Snowden’s exposures, through cosmetic changes to create the false illusion the spying will be curbed.

About an hour after his exchange with Brandis, Ludlam returned to the floor of the Senate to protest against Brandis’s comments as “an embarrassing and borderline hysterical display” by an individual, “behaving like an infant,” who was not fit to be “the highest law officer in the land.” This is to completely belittle and cover up the real significance of the government’s systemic attack on Snowden.

The Abbott government is deliberately identifying with Washington’s witch-hunt. It is the only government in the world to publicly accuse Snowden of being a “traitor.” This highlights just how central

Australia is to the US military-intelligence apparatus, particularly in Asia, where Australian embassies operate as NSA listening posts. These operations, together with the basing of US marines in Australia and the hosting of US naval ships and war planes, are critical to the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot,” announced in the Australian parliament in 2011, to strategically and militarily encircle and confront China.

Ludlam’s performance is another demonstration of the duplicitous role of the Greens. They publicly posture as critics of what Ludlam labels “unnecessary” surveillance “overkill” in order to appeal to all those outraged by the revelations of US and Australian spying operations, and create the illusion that the parliamentary system can provide safety checks. Inside the Senate, the Greens camouflage the political implications of Canberra’s alignment with Washington and offer advice on how best to provide some window dressing for the interception laws.



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