

New Zealand, Australian governments complicit in US drone attacks

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In a New Zealand television interview last week, American investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill said in that the National Party government is “extremely aware” of US drone attacks, including one which killed NZ citizen Daryl Jones (also known as Muslim bin John) in Yemen last year. Scahill, author of *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, who was in Auckland at a writers’ festival, also implicated the Australian government.

Scahill told TV3’s “The Nation” on May 17 that he had seen “dozens of top secret documents” that the US had provided to the NZ government showing it had full knowledge of the drone strikes and was thoroughly briefed on the program. “The fact is that New Zealand, through signal intercepts, is directly involved with what is effectively an American assassination program,” Scahill charged.

The *Australian* newspaper reported on April 16 that five people, including Jones and Australian citizen Christopher Harvard, were victims of an extra-judicial killing by a US Predator drone on November 19. (See: “Australian, New Zealand citizens killed by US drone strike in Yemen”)

The Australian and New Zealand governments promptly defended the assassinations. NZ Prime Minister John Key claimed the killings were “legitimate ... given that three of the people killed were well known al-Qaeda operatives.” Key provided no evidence for his assertion and neither government explained why the strike was kept secret for five months. Both claimed they had no prior knowledge of or involvement in the US operation.

Scahill, who is working with journalist Glen Greenwald on the security files from American whistleblower Edward Snowden, flatly contradicted these assurances. He said there are “real questions”

over the New Zealand and Australian roles in drone attacks. According to Scahill, information both governments are providing Washington could lead to the tracking and killing of their own citizens.

Scahill declared that it was “pretty scandalous” for New Zealand and Australia to give the US the go-ahead to kill their citizens in an “undeclared war zone.” Scahill said he did not believe Key had any intelligence to suggest Jones was engaged in criminal activity. “If the New Zealand government had that intelligence, why wasn’t he indicted, why wasn’t he charged under New Zealand law with a crime of supporting terrorism?” he asked.

Scahill suggested forthcoming US National Security Agency (NSA) documents would confirm the true extent of the NZ spy agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau’s (GCSB), involvement with the US drone attacks. According to Scahill, the NSA, with the help of its Five Eyes allies—New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Britain—is building a network of citizens’ data by mass storing of phone calls and emails.

Last year, Fairfax media reported that the joint US-Australian spy base at Pine Gap in Central Australia was centrally involved in pinpointing targets for drone assassination in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In response to Scahill’s charges, Key declared that “they are completely wrong” but his answers to further questions were guarded and evasive. While Key has consistently maintained that the GCSB does not collect mass data on NZ citizens, information released by Snowden showed that the NSA monitors the citizens of all its Five Eyes partners without always informing them, thereby providing its partners with “plausible deniability.”

Key told TVNZ on April 22 that the government

“doesn’t necessarily always comment” on deaths like those in Yemen. He said that the GCSB monitored individuals who the government claimed “present a potential threat” and indicated there “might be others,” but refused to elaborate or discuss whether other New Zealanders have been killed by drones. Key justified the illegal US drone assassinations, saying “they have been an effective way of prosecuting people that are legitimate targets.”

Key did admit that NZ had gathered information on Afghanistan and passed it to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), but absurdly claimed he didn’t know what it was used for. Asked whether the data could have led to drone strikes, he said: “It’s possible. I can’t rule that out.”

In fact, former US “black ops” operator Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Shaffer has previously detailed the work carried out by one NZ defence analyst stationed in Afghanistan. In his 2010 book *Operation Dark Heart*, which was heavily censored by the US government, Shaffer revealed how a NZ intelligence officer identified Taliban targets. Her work led to the pinpointing of an Al Qaeda base in Pakistan. NZ researcher Nicky Hager said this week that NZ was definitely complicit in drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen and accused Key of being “flippant” about the GCSB’s role.

Documents released by Snowden and cited in Greenwald’s book, *No Place to Hide*, show the GCSB is closely enmeshed with some of the most secretive parts of the US spying apparatus. One NSA document explains to New Zealand and its other “Five Eyes” intelligence partners that the NSA’s ambition is to “know it all,” “collect it all,” “exploit it all” and “partner it all.” According to Greenwald, Five Eyes members share most of their surveillance activities and regularly meet.

In material obtained under the Official Information Act by the *New Zealand Herald*, GCSB spies were shown NSA instructional slides on how to operate the X-Keyscore surveillance program which trawls mass harvested email addresses, phone numbers, online chat, web-based email and attachments. They were also briefed on the NSA’s efforts to deliberately put “backdoors” into private companies’ computer networks and were given access to a program called “Homing Pigeon” that allowed in-air communications

on passenger jets to be monitored.

The GCSB was also privy to diplomatic espionage by other Five Eyes partners which included the capture of emails, text messages and phone calls between the Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff and her aides. Mexican presidential aspirant [now president] Enrique Pena Nieto was also subjected to spying activities by Five Eyes partners.

The opposition Labour and the Greens last week reiterated their demand for a “review” of the spy agencies. Labour leader David Cunliffe declared that if Labour wins the September election he would ensure “that every New Zealander has the right to be free from blanket surveillance from our agencies *unless there is a judge’s warrant and probable cause.*” (emphasis added).

However, Cunliffe bluntly refused to condemn drone attacks, saying he would not make a “categorical statement” because it was “a very complex area.” He made clear that he would, in fact, support attacks on NZ citizens, so long as the government observed its “duty of care” to inform New Zealanders about “such situations,” adding that it “should be done without being too specific about operational details.”

In other words, stripped of Cunliffe’s meaningless qualifications, Labour supports both surveillance and drone murders of New Zealand citizens. A review would only be used to increase the repressive powers of the state.



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