

Australian spy chief defends new “terror” laws

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Australia’s domestic spy chief, David Irvine, the head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), delivered an address to the National Press Club on Wednesday, seeking to defend the Abbott government’s latest proposed “anti-terrorism” legislation.

It was the first-ever such appearance by an ASIO director-general. For decades, they remained in the shadows of the corridors of power. His appearance itself indicates the far-reaching character of the as-yet-unseen laws, which are known to include the compulsory retention of all online communications data.

Irvine is mounting a propaganda offensive, obviously authorised by the government, to try to overcome popular opposition. He also appeared on breakfast television this month—another previously unheard of media event.

Like the Obama administration and other Western governments, Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government is seizing on the debacle produced by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 to stoke “terrorist” scare campaigns. Irvine sought to drum up fears that some of the 60 or so Australians who have allegedly joined the fighting in Syria and Iraq will return to conduct terrorist attacks in Australia.

These efforts are saturated with hypocrisy because the Islamic fundamentalists of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have been directly spawned by the US and Western efforts to overthrow the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad.

As Irvine spoke, the Abbott government was sending increasingly clear signals of its readiness to join new US-led military action in Iraq and Syria. Irvine denied that the government was specifically victimising Muslims. In reality, it is invoking Islamic “terrorism”

as a pretext for operations to assert US hegemony over the Middle East, while deliberately fanning anti-Muslim xenophobia at home.

While the government’s laws will initially target Islamists, a police-state framework is being prepared for wider use, amid rising social and political tensions. Irvine said the alleged terrorist threat did not come exclusively from Muslims. “Such threats can come from a variety of religious and ideologically focussed groups, from the right or the left,” he asserted.

The “metadata” plan will compel Internet providers, mobile phone companies and social media outlets to store all their data for two years. This will enable the intelligence and police forces to trawl through on-line activity records, giving them a comprehensive picture of everyone’s personal and political lives.

Ludicrously, Irvine said accessing such data was akin to ASIO looking up numbers in phone books. The truth is that metadata shows many details, including a person’s movements, patterns of behaviour, Internet and social media destinations, and friends and contacts.

Earlier this month, a parliamentary library report confirmed that URLs of web pages visited are already being handed over “without a warrant” by Internet providers, including Telstra, “under the umbrella of metadata.” Even according to official records tabled in parliament, the spy and police forces requested, and duly received, access to metadata 319,874 times in 2012–13.

From the documents leaked by US National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden, it is also clear that ASIO and its partner agencies act as data collection conduits for the NSA’s global network, regardless of any formal legal constraints. Australia is part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance with the US, Britain, New Zealand and Canada, and its

agencies play a key role in the NSA's massive electronic spying operations.

The ASIO chief revealed the concern in ruling circles over the opposition to the metadata plan, which was initially proposed by the previous Labor government but shelved in the lead-up to last year's election. Irvine declared: "It is important the debate avoids paranoia, for example evoking the spectre of Big Brother, 1984, mass surveillance and mass violations of privacy."

In reality, the all-encompassing monitoring of the population in 2014 goes beyond the "Big Brother is watching" surveillance envisaged by George Orwell in his famous novel, *1984*. The physical tracking, snooping and interrogation described by Orwell could not match today's exploitation of modern information technology.

Another widely opposed measure in the government's proposed legislation will effectively reverse the onus of proof in terrorism-related trials by declaring parts of the Middle East to be "designated areas." Anyone travelling to these zones would have to prove that their trip was innocent, or face imprisonment.

De facto, this regime is already being applied. Abbott told parliament that a man bound for Lebanon was recently bundled off a plane at Melbourne airport, detained and then placed under surveillance. The prime minister announced the formation of "border protection counter terrorism units" at airports to "monitor movements of people on our national security watch list."

Yesterday, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison boasted that "at least" five people have been intercepted because they were likely to travel to Syria. Both Abbott's office and Morrison's failed to respond to requests from the WSWs to specify what legal powers were being invoked for these actions.

This program is just one of many being funded via a \$630 million boost to the spy and security agencies that Abbott unveiled earlier this month when he outlined the proposed new laws. The other measures in the planned package include:

- Broadening the criteria for banning an organisation to cover not only advocating specific terrorist acts but "encouraging terrorism," including via social media.
- Lowering the threshold for arrest without warrant for terrorism offences.

- Making it easier for the government to suspend passports.

As with an earlier package of "terror" laws unveiled in July, this means intensifying the already draconian framework that successive governments, Liberal and Labor, have erected since 2001.

In an extraordinary display of the unanimity within the political establishment, and the efforts being made to intimidate any dissent, Labor Party leader Bill Shorten rushed to reassure the government of bipartisan support for the legislation, after a Labor senator called into question the government's political motives.

"Let me state clearly, when it comes to national security, Labor sees this as a matter above politics," Shorten insisted on Wednesday. He said he had "counselled" Senator Sue Lines, who earlier accused the government of trying to "scare the Australian public and to distract everyone" from its austerity budget.

Lines merely suggested that the government was trying to divert the deep popular hostility toward its budget offensive against welfare, health, education and other social services. Government ministers immediately feigned outrage and demanded that Shorten pull her into line.

Shorten quickly obliged. "I've spoken to Senator Lines," he said. "Our position, Labor's position, is that we will work in the best interests of this nation and our stability and security."

With Labor's full support, the government is responding to mounting social discontent by fomenting "terrorism" scares and building an increasingly repressive state apparatus, overturning fundamental legal and democratic rights in the process.



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