

Australian government exploits Sydney siege to advance “war on terror”

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In the wake of Monday’s hostage standoff in a central Sydney cafe, the entire Australian media and political establishment has backed the federal government’s announcement of a “review” in order to justify a raft of draconian new measures. From the very outset, the incident has been seized on to advance the reactionary agenda behind the “war on terror”—support for US military operations abroad and deeper attacks on fundamental democratic rights at home.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott set the stage for the review at a press conference on Tuesday afternoon. Having lavished praise on the “professionalism” and “commitment” of the security apparatus during the 16-hour siege, he focussed attention on the hostage-taker Man Haron Monis by querying why he was not on “appropriate watch lists” and how he could be “entirely at large in the community.”

Abbott’s remarks sought to divert public attention from the government’s own role in manufacturing a national “terrorism” crisis—under conditions of shock and horror produced by the police shootout in the early hours of Tuesday. Having been deliberately kept in the dark throughout Monday by the government and the media, the population awoke to find that Monis and two innocent hostages—Katrina Dawson, 38, a barrister and mother of three, and the cafe manager Tori Johnson, 34—were dead.

As of today, neither the Abbott government nor the New South Wales (NSW) state authorities has provided any official explanation for, or account of, the police storming of the Lindt cafe. None of the many questions surrounding the decision to activate the entire counter-terrorism apparatus on Monday have been answered. Instead, following his “query” on Tuesday, Abbott announced a joint review with the NSW government on Wednesday.

The political purpose of the “review” is evident from its narrow terms of reference, directed at Monis, a mentally unstable Iranian refugee who was on bail on allegations of sexual assault and being an accessory to murder. By implication, Monis should not have been allowed into Australia, granted refugee status, unemployment benefits, legal aid or bail, and, if not in jail, should have been under constant police surveillance.

Abbott’s claim that Monis was not closely watched by the police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) is absurd. Monis came to national attention when he was charged in 2007 with sending “offensive” letters to the families of Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan. He staged many individual protests about his treatment at the hands of the police and ASIO.

Counter-terrorism expert Greg Barton told the *Sydney Morning Herald* there was no such thing as a single watch list but rather “concentric circles” of monitoring and surveillance, depending on priorities. On Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio, Attorney-General George Brandis said: “I think we need to be careful with this word ‘watch list’ because ... there are various levels of investigation or scrutiny that ASIO conducts.”

Abbott’s aim in setting up the review is to stoke every possible right-wing anti-refugee, anti-welfare and law-and order issue. In a 2GB interview with radio shock-jock Ray Hadley, Abbott said he was “incredulous and exasperated” that Monis was “on our streets.” The purpose of the review, above all, is to stir up fears about further terrorist attacks to justify the ramping up of the “war on terror.”

Following Australia’s largest-ever anti-terror police raids, on homes in Sydney and Brisbane, in September,

ASIO Director General David Irvine declared that he was particularly concerned about “the so-called ‘lone wolf’ or ‘stand-alone’ groups who act independently and throw off few clues as to malicious intent.” Amid a growing drum-beat in the media about the danger of a “lone wolf” attack, the Sydney siege was made to order, to justify further repressive measures to overturn basic democratic rights and beef up the security apparatus.

After all, if every individual who “throws off few clues” is now to come within the scope of ASIO, this is the recipe for a police state. That is already well underway, with the massive expansion of ASIO and its powers over the past decade. This year the Abbott government has pushed through three new tranches of anti-terror laws, with the support of the opposition parties, and will undoubtedly use the Sydney siege to ram through the fourth, involving the compulsory retention of the Internet “meta-data” for the entire population.

All the opposition parties and the media immediately fell into line with the government’s review. Opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten told Fairfax Media: “There are clearly questions about this horrific tragedy that need to be answered.” Far from questioning the review’s terms of reference and aims, he called for it “to be open and unrestricted [and] the findings must be made public.”

Acting Greens Leader Adam Bandt, who has been full of praise for the police and security agencies from the start, endorsed the review, adding a proposal to examine the adequacy of gun control laws. Like the Labor Party, he stressed complete bipartisanship on the response to the Sydney siege, declaring: “It is critical that the nation comes together.”

It goes without saying that the Murdoch media and tabloids are fully on board, but the same is true of the so-called liberal press. A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial yesterday declared that “Abbott was right to call an urgent federal-state investigation into whether systemic failures in police, security, justice and even gun control systems allowed the deranged and violent Man Haron Momis to walk freely among us.”

The editorial railed against the decision to grant Monis bail and called for a review of “the surveillance regime and intelligence sharing.” While cautioning against a rush to judgment, it declared: “The logical

next step would be to jail the likes of Monis indefinitely before they can act out their sick plans.” The newspaper did not rule out such a step, but simply noted that it “opens a whole new debate about how far society will accept limits to hard-won freedoms of association and expression.”

This extraordinary statement is testimony to the lack of any constituency in ruling circles for the defence of essential democratic rights. Throughout the past week, there has been complete unanimity among parliamentary parties. During the siege, every media outlet functioned as an arm of the state apparatus, taking orders from the police and security officials about what could be published, probing nothing and criticising nothing. In its aftermath, they have continued to ask none of the essential questions.

Above all, the Abbott government’s review seeks to deflect attention from the central question that must be posed: why was a terrible, but relatively straightforward, police matter elevated to the status of a national emergency involving the entire security apparatus? The political purpose of that decision, like the review, is to inflate the “war on terror” in preparation for greater Australian commitment to US-led conflicts and a deepening assault on the social and democratic rights of the working class.



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