

Australian establishment lays out agenda after Sydney siege

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The hostage crisis last week at a café in Sydney's Martin Place has been exploited to engineer a further lurch to the right across the Australian political and media establishment. Proclamations that the "home soil" has been attacked by international terrorism are being used to invoke the necessity for war-time national unity and the suppression of any opposition to both the government's foreign policy and its domestic economic agenda.

From the start, the incident was used to justify the US-led military operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which involve more than 600 Australian personnel. Within 24 hours of the end of the siege, Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced a "review" into the background of the hostage-taker, 50-year-old Man Haron Monis, which will lead to an even deeper assault on civil liberties than has already been carried out on the pretext of combatting terrorism.

The review's terms of reference leave little doubt that it will indict the fact that Monis was given refugee status, granted Australian citizenship and accessed his rights to unemployment benefits, legal aid and bail. Its purpose is to advance right-wing agitation for more discriminatory immigration laws, harsher conditions to receive bail, welfare and legal assistance and, above all, for far more draconian powers allowing the intelligence agencies and the police to spy on and imprison people who are alleged potential perpetrators of "politically motivated violence."

The review will not address the real questions raised by the incident in Sydney, which above all centre on why the taking of hostages by an individual who was well-known to the authorities as a disturbed publicity seeker was portrayed to the Australian population and the world as a major terrorist act. Far from probing the manner in which the hostage crisis was dealt, the media

has focussed on defending the actions of the Abbott government and insisting the entire political establishment fall into line behind the agenda being advanced in its wake.

The editor-at-large of Rupert Murdoch's *Australian*, Paul Kelly, authored an opinion piece on Saturday endorsing Abbott's "review." He labelled Monis's actions the outcome of "a series of public policy failures" and declared that no-one could be allowed to "resist reforms to obvious defects in the system." Monis, Kelly asserted, was someone who "exploited for ill causes so many aspects of Australia's legal structure and public entitlements." He applauded the fact that the review would "almost certainly light a political fuse" and would "impinge on so many sensitive issues of our politics."

In a column on Saturday, Peter Hartcher, the political editor of the nominally liberal *Sydney Morning Herald*, went even further than Kelly. Hartcher made an amalgam between the hostage crisis and the government's mid-year economic review, which admitted there was no prospect of the budget returning to a surplus until at least 2020. "These events," he declared, "challenge national solvency and national security. In other words, they test Australia's very sovereignty. Can we meet the challenge?"

Hartcher denounced the parliamentary parties for failing to address the purported terrorist threats and mounting government debt. Australian politics, he asserted, "has been an indulgence of petty squabbles, ideological excesses, and straight-out betrayals of the national interest in pursuit of political advantage." The Abbott government, he continued, "is so far failing to adjust to the budget realities," while the Labor Party opposition was "being plain irresponsible."

The central thrust of Hartcher's argument was that

the government and the opposition must display the same “national unity” on cutting public spending as they do in foreign policy and the “war on terror.” There is complete bipartisanship between the major parties over Australian imperialism’s unconditional support for US militarism internationally, and the beefing up of the Australian armed forces and the powers of the intelligence agencies and police. As the Sydney siege unfolded, Labor leader Bill Shorten declared his full support for Abbott’s actions.

However, the key austerity measures in the Abbott government’s May budget remain blocked in the Senate by Labor and the Greens, who have been reluctant to vote for deeply unpopular policies. Hartcher declared that “the terrorist attack has brought forth a better side of Australian political character from the leadership.” It gave “hope,” he concluded, in a clear reference to his call for a bipartisan program to slash the living standards of the working class through a devastating assault on welfare entitlements, public health and public education.

Kelly’s and Hartcher’s comments came after weeks of editorials and columns demanding that the Abbott government end the budget logjam. Abbott’s cabinet reshuffle on Sunday indicates that he heard the messages. The main change was the elevation of Scott Morrison from Immigration to the portfolio of Social Services, which is responsible for the welfare programs that make up the largest area of government spending, and upon which millions of people depend.

As Immigration Minister, Morrison presided over the brutal persecution of refugees. The Navy is being used to turn back refugee boats while those asylum seekers who enter Australian waters are imprisoned on camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. The so-called success of the operations has led the establishment media to dub Morrison as one of the government’s most effective figures. The policy has the Labor Party’s support.

Morrison’s new brief is to apply the same brazen brutality to welfare recipients. Amid the deepening global economic crisis and the savage austerity measures inflicted on the working class in Europe and North America, the Australian corporate elite is demanding an end to “entitlements” in order to force welfare recipients to take any work available, and drive down the wages and conditions of the working class as

a whole.

Morrison’s task is to enlist Labor’s support for policies to restrict eligibility for social security, condemn people to utter destitution and reduce government spending as part of a broader austerity agenda. Access to payments such as unemployment benefits, disability support pensions, aged pensions and family benefits will all be targeted. The tabloid *Daily Telegraph* hailed Morrison’s appointment with a headline declaring that the minister who “stopped the boats” would now “Stop the Bludgers.”

As for the opposition that will be generated by deeper attacks on working class living standards, the political establishment will meet it with the same methods it uses in the “war on terror”—lies, intimidation and outright police-state violence.



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