

Sydney siege inquest: An exercise in damage control

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The coronial inquiry into the December 15–16 cafe siege in Sydney began yesterday, but only for a short opening session. The carefully-managed hearing made clear that the overriding aim of the proceedings is to attempt to counter widespread public suspicion about what happened, while protecting the state and federal governments, police and intelligence agencies that were responsible for the tragic outcome.

Over the past six weeks, no official statement has been released concerning even the most elementary facts about the 17-hour siege that ended with the deaths of the hostage-taker Man Haron Monis and two hostages—barrister Katrina Dawson and Lindt cafe manager Tori Johnson. In a highly unusual step, State Coroner Michael Barnes instructed counsel assisting the coroner, Jeremy Gormly, to “answer speculation” and release some details of the events.

After outlining what he claimed would be a full investigation of the events, Gormly provided a highly-selective account of what took place on December 15–16 that pre-empted many of the issues that the inquiry is to examine. No evidence was provided to support his “release of facts,” nor was there any opportunity for it to be challenged. While Gormly declared that what he presented was only his “current interpretation,” nevertheless his comments will stand as the only official statement until the inquest resumes, which could well be months away.

Gormly’s “release of facts” dealt solely with two discrete episodes—the start of the siege after Monis entered the cafe in central Sydney at 8.33 a.m. on December 15 and its tragic conclusion when police stormed the premises in the early hours of December 16. While providing some details, the account was chiefly significant for what it excluded.

Gormly shed no light on Monis’s extensive contact

with police and intelligence agencies prior to the siege, whether he was being monitored, or if he had been identified on any of the many cameras that monitor Martin Place where the cafe is located. Monis had previously protested outside the Martin Place studios of Channel Seven, which beefed up its security in response.

The 50-year-old Monis was an erratic and unstable individual—an Iranian refugee and self-proclaimed Shiite cleric who faced charges over allegations of sexual assault and assisting the murder of his ex-wife. Gormly said the coronial inquiry will seek a psychiatric assessment of Monis, as well as delve into other aspects of his life.

According to Gormly’s account, Monis was in the cafe for at least half an hour before telling the manager to lock the doors. He pulled out a sawn-off shotgun, ordered staff and customers against a wall and told them to display a flag with Arabic script, which was not that of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). At 9.44 a.m., he instructed Tori Johnson to ring the emergency 000 number and tell the operator that he and others had been taken hostage in the Lindt cafe, radio-controlled bombs had been placed in three city locations and that Australia was under attack by ISIS. The claims about the bombs were false, as were those about ISIS.

Within minutes, police and the paramilitary Tactical Response Unit were on the scene. Gormly made no mention of the fact that high-level decisions were taken to elevate the situation into a major national crisis. Around 10 a.m., Prime Minister Tony Abbott and the cabinet national security committee met and in league with the state government in New South Wales, set in motion a massive police operation that sealed off much of central Sydney.

The 000 call, which had not previously been reported to the public, lasted 12 minutes, yet no further details were released yesterday. Did Monis identify himself? Did he issue any demands? As it turned out later, after the siege was over, Monis issued very limited demands—an ISIS flag, an acknowledgement that the siege was an ISIS attack and a phone call with Abbott. Yet these demands were deliberately ignored.

Gormly’s account appears to be scripted to justify the transformation of what was a serious, but relatively straightforward police matter into a “terrorist” crisis—all in a very short time-frame. Yet as Gormly acknowledged, “it seems he [Monis] had not established any contact with Islamic State”—a fact that would have been known to Australian intelligence agencies.

The Abbott government, supported by the Labor opposition and a compliant media, seized on cafe standoff to create an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that fed into its “war on terror” agenda of supporting the US-led war in the Middle East and ramming through a battery of draconian anti-terror laws.

Gormly’s description of the end of the siege around 2 a.m. on December 16 was likewise carefully tailored. He provided graphic details of Monis’s execution-style killing of Tori Johnson, which was widely circulated in today’s establishment media. However, what prompted the shooting was the increasingly desperate situation inside the cafe that had been created by the refusal of state and federal governments to negotiate on any of Monis’s demands.

The authorities insisted that the media suppress all news about Monis and his demands, no doubt concerned that public pressure for negotiations could mount. Inside the cafe, the hostages were frantically trying to get the message out, with one appealing to “send the fricking Islamic flag.” Gormly revealed that he would have to sift through over three hundred 000 calls, as well as many emails, Facebook pages and other social media. Just before Johnson’s murder, a third batch of hostages made a desperate escape by breaking down a door.

The decision not to negotiate with Monis and to block all media coverage of his demands is likely to remain shrouded in secrecy. Gormly indicated that there would be an examination of the police management of the siege, but foreshadowed that “we will have to bear in

mind that public exposure of details of plans of that type can themselves involve security issues. That evidence may require special treatment.” The role of political actors such as Abbott will remain well outside the bounds of the inquiry.

The police storming of the cafe resulted in the deaths of Monis and Katrina Dawson, as well as the injury of three other hostages and a member of the police paramilitary assault team. Monis died in a hail of bullets, including two to the head. Dawson was hit by six police bullets or fragments of bullets, one of which severed a major blood vessel. All the other injuries were caused by police bullets.

Once they get underway, the coronial inquiry’s proceedings are likely to reveal more details of the events surrounding the Sydney siege. However, one can predict in advance that the inquest will avoid any examination of the manner in which the Abbott government and the establishment as a whole exploited the siege for reactionary political purposes and the impact of their decisions on its outcome.



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