

Australian government uses Sydney siege report to ramp up anti-terror laws

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Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has seized on a joint federal/state government review of the December 15–16 Lindt café siege in central Sydney, not only to justify the elevation of the incident into a major national crisis, but to foreshadow draconian new anti-terror measures due to be announced in a speech today.

Abbott, who is under considerable pressure following a leadership challenge just a fortnight ago, playing the anti-terror card for all he is worth. Speaking yesterday after releasing the review, he declared that the “inescapable conclusion” was that “the system has let us down” and indicated that he intended to appoint a counter-terrorism “tsar” to beef up the police and security apparatus.

Abbott branded the hostage-taker Man Haron Monis “a monster” who “should not have been in our community” to justify a further crackdown on asylum seekers, welfare recipients and to tighten or introduce new laws across a range of issues from bail to citizenship and firearms. He also made clear that the Coalition government would introduce new legislation to ban organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, which opposes violent terrorism but is critical of US and Australian military interventions in the Middle East.

The prime minister sought to again wind up a climate of fear and uncertainty, saying that the threat of terrorism was worsening, to justify the new inroads into legal and democratic rights. “Australia has entered a new, long-term era of heightened terrorism,” he said, which meant the country “would need to revisit the debate between the rights of the individual and community protect.”

Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten has already indicated bipartisan support declared that it was not “beyond the wit and wisdom of the Australian parliament to get the balance right. If the prime minister has specific measures in mind then we will study that.” The Labor Party has rubberstamped, with minor amendments, the barrage of anti-terror legislation pushed through by the

Abbott government over the past year.

In fact, what the Sydney siege demonstrates is the blatantly political character of the “war on terror.” A standoff involving an unstable, erratic individual, who was well known to police and intelligence agencies, was transformed into full-scale national emergency. Thousands of police locked down much of central Sydney. No serious attempt was made to negotiate Monis’s limited demands creating a highly strained situation inside the Lindt café that ended tragically in a police shoot-out in which Monis and two hostages were killed.

The report of the Joint Commonwealth-New South Wales Review released yesterday is a whitewash designed to cover-up the extensive relations between Monis and various federal and NSW government agencies, including the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and NSW police.

It is necessary to recall that just months before the Sydney siege hundreds of heavily-armed police and ASIO agents had mounted the largest ever anti-terror raids in Sydney on September 18. Fifteen premises were raided and 17 people detained all on the basis of one phone conversation allegedly threatening to kill a person at random. The raids took place as Abbott announced the dispatch of Australian war planes and troops to join the new US-led war in the Middle East.

The claims that the police had thwarted an imminent “terror threat” rapidly fell apart, however. Only one person was charged with a terrorist-related offence—a vague charge of conspiracy. While the media repeated lurid claims that Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) “terrorists” were planning a beheading, the police later admitted the word “behead” had not be used over the phone. Moreover, the weapon that was allegedly to be used turned out to be a plastic sword.

From the Abbott government’s standpoint, the raids had

failed to create the climate of public fear that it wanted.

The central function of the review is to obscure the lies and contradictions contained in the official account of last December's events. While some 800 police and ASIO agents were mobilised on the basis of one intercepted phone call in September, Monis who had been on the radar of police and ASIO ever since he arrived in Australia in 1996 as an Iranian refugee, managed to wander into Martin Place in central Sydney—an area bristling with CCTV cameras—and take over a café without anyone in the security apparatus supposedly being alert to such a possibility.

The review concluded that “right up until that fateful day in December 2014, and notwithstanding the fact agencies were familiar with Monis over many years and repeatedly examined his case and any new information that emerged, ASIO and law enforcement agencies never found any information to indicate Monis had the intent or desire to commit a terrorist act.” This claim is simply not credible.

Monis was a mentally unstable individual who had a long history of publicity seeking for his various grievances. He was wanted in Iran on fraud charges, postured as a Shiite cleric and spiritual healer, repeatedly tried to ingratiate himself with ASIO and the police by offering information on various “terrorist plots” and sent insensitive letters to the family of Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan blaming them for the crimes of the US and Australian governments.

As outlined in the review, ASIO carried out four investigations into Monis. On two occasions—during the Pope's tour of Australia in 2008 and the 2011 Royal visit—the AFP identified Monis as “a person of interest” because of his “obsessive preoccupations and fixated interest in High Office Holders and dignitaries.” Indeed, Monis had fired off letters of protest around the world to everyone from the US president to the British queen, always providing copies of his correspondence to ASIO.

The review deliberately obscures the nature of relations between Monis and ASIO which has a track record of exploiting such unstable individuals as spies and provocateurs. No explanation is given as to why ASIO gave Monis an adverse security assessment in January 1999 as “indirect, and possibly a direct, risk to national security” then overturned it the following year. Given his repeated offers to assist, ASIO could well have strung him along as a useful, if unreliable, asset.

The review insists that there were no warning signs that Monis's previous opposition to violent terrorist acts had

changed. In the course of 2013–14, Monis was under intense pressure from a battery of charges that had been brought against him, including charges of sexual assault during his time as “spiritual healer” and accessory to the murder of his former wife. He alleged that he was physically abused while on remand in November 2013. In October 2014, he was charged with 37 further counts of sexual assault.

On November 17, Monis posted a declaration on his web site that he had converted from Shiite to Sunni Islam and pledged his allegiance to the “Caliph”—a reference to the various Sunni extremist groups, including ISIS whose goal is to restore the caliphate. Between December 9–12, the National Security Hotline receives 18 calls and emails relating to Monis and calling attention to his Facebook page. Yet, ASIO, according to the review at least, assessed that Monis had no “desire or intent to engage in terrorism” and took no action.

It is totally implausible that ASIO did not recognise that Monis's actions represented an abrupt change in his attitudes. His conversion to the Sunni sect, which the review simply notes in passing as “unusual,” meant the embrace of organisations that bitterly denounce all Shiites as heretics and apostates. The danger signs were there but were simply ignored, raising the question as to whether a high-level decision was taken to allow the attack to proceed and provide the needed pretext for ramping up “war on terror.”

Whatever the answer to that question, the Sydney siege succeeded where the September police raids failed. It has enabled the Abbott government to bring forth a new slew of anti-democratic laws and measures while justifying the continued involvement of the Australian military in the criminal US led war in Iraq and Syria.



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