

Australian PM outlines sweeping new “anti-terror” measures

Mike Head
24 February 2015

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott yesterday delivered a televised “national security” statement at the Australian Federal Police (AFP) headquarters in Canberra, flanked by three ministers, scores of police, military and intelligence officials and six Australian flags.

Having barely survived a challenge to his leadership of the Liberal Party two weeks ago, Abbott was clearly intent on establishing his credentials as a security strongman, while seeking to stoke fears of terrorism to justify harsh new anti-terror laws and Australian participation in the expanding US-led war in the Middle East.

His speech sought to further politically exploit the December 15–16 Martin Place café siege in central Sydney, which his government elevated into a major terrorist emergency. Abbott timed the address to follow Sunday’s release of the official review of the siege, which sought to justify the government’s response to the incident and whitewash the extensive relations between the deranged hostage-taker, Man Haron Monis, and various police and intelligence agencies.

Once again, as he did in releasing the review, Abbott declared that the siege demonstrated the need for even greater “counter-terrorism” powers and that Monis’s ability to gain citizenship and to get bail on several criminal charges required a further crackdown on asylum seekers, welfare recipients and the rights of people accused of offences.

Abbott’s rhetoric was alarmist, replete with phrases such as “rising dangers,” “ominous signs” and a “new dark age” in the Middle East. Of course, there was no reference to Australia’s participation in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, which created the conditions for the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other Islamist

militias.

As “evidence” of a worsening threat of domestic terrorism, Abbott cited “the frenzied attack on two police officers in Melbourne and the horror of the Martin Place siege,” as well as the arrest of 20 people in six “counter terrorism operations” since September.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, last year’s incidents in Melbourne and Sydney involved unstable individuals who were well known to the police and spy agencies. Abbott’s comments on the 20 arrests further prejudiced the prospect of a fair trial for these defendants, who face an array of unsubstantiated charges.

In fact, his speech pointed to the *modus operandi* involved in the police raids: conduct mass arrests, regardless of whether any evidence exists to support a prosecution, in order to conduct escalating terrorist scare campaigns. “Police do not have the luxury to wait and watch,” Abbott declared. “Some of these raids may not result in prosecution.”

The prime minister outlined sweeping proposals to overturn the supposed “benefit of the doubt” given to people applying for visas, citizenship, welfare, legal aid and bail. In the first place, this is designed to promote anti-immigrant, particularly anti-Muslim, sentiment and give greater powers to government officials and the spy agencies to bar access to residency and other basic rights. Beyond that, it has wider implications for the treatment of all those facing accusations by the police and security authorities, including the presumption of innocence for those on trial.

Abbott also declared that the government would strip Australian citizenship from dual nationals accused of fighting in the Middle East and revoke “privileges” of citizenship for any Australians “involved in terrorism,” including the right to leave or return to Australia, and

access to welfare.

Further, the prime minister declared: “Organisations and individuals blatantly spreading discord and division ... should not do so with impunity.” He vowed to enforce the “terrorism advocacy laws” passed last year—which are so broad that they can outlaw expressions of opposition to the US-led interventions in the Middle East. He foreshadowed unspecified “stronger prohibitions on vilifying, intimidating or inciting hatred.”

Abbott declared his intention to ban Hizb ut-Tahir, an Islamic fundamentalist group that opposes terrorism, but criticises US and Australian military operations in the Middle East. However, the words “discord and division” are wide enough to cover anyone opposing these operations, or the government’s deepening austerity drive and the plans for enhanced mass surveillance.

Abbott reiterated his demand for the rapid passage through the Senate of the metadata retention bill, which will force Internet and phone companies to keep all their data for two years so that the security agencies can trawl through the records to compile detailed dossiers on the movements and political activities of millions of people.

The prime minister signaled a further boosting of the security apparatus, including the appointment of a National Counter Terrorism Coordinator, on top of the \$630 million funding increase announced last year.

In comments calculated to incite anti-Islamic sentiment, and divide the working class, Abbott accused Muslim leaders of not speaking out enough against terrorism. He also encouraged anti-immigrant xenophobia, declaring: “No one should live in our country while denying our values.”

At the same time, Abbott insisted that “everybody, not just Muslim community leaders” needed to “speak up clearly”—an implicit threat to anyone refusing to line up behind the fraudulent “war on terror.”

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten, flanked by Australian flags as well, pledged bipartisan backing in advance for the government’s yet-to-be-detailed measures. National security should be “above politics,” he said. “We believe that when it comes to fighting terrorism, we are in this together.”

Aware of public opposition to the government’s moves, especially the data retention bill, Shorten said

there should be a “strong presumption” in favour of individual liberty. However, this presumption could be “reduced, rebutted or offset” if the current laws “are proved to be inadequate.” In other words, Labor will support the measures with minor modifications, as it did on the Abbott government’s first three tranches of “counter-terrorism” legislation last year.

Greens leader Christine Milne, also wary of the popular reaction, said there was “no justification” for the proposed measures. Last year, the Greens used similar language to criticise aspects of the government’s previous legislation, while stating their underlying support for the security agencies.

Milne urged the government to instead focus on “social cohesion.” The Greens last year tabled a Social Cohesion Bill to develop programs to “stop young Australians from becoming radicalised.” In fact, the police and spy agencies already conduct an array of such programs, which include operations to place informers inside targeted groups, where they can be used to stage or provoke alleged terrorist plots.

Such entrapment activities, which have been involved in most of the terrorist arrests over the past 15 years, are being stepped-up. The Sydney siege review mentioned a new AFP-led multi-agency National Disruption Group, which was described as “managing referrals to the Countering Violent Extremism intervention program.” This involves identifying “at risk” individuals for “case management,” sometimes as a bail condition.

Editorials today in the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review* endorsed Abbott’s speech, underlining the support throughout ruling circles for the deepening assault on fundamental legal and democratic rights. Under conditions of a worsening economic situation and escalating demands by the corporate and financial elite for the cutting of social spending, wages and working conditions, these measures will be used, not just against Muslims and immigrants, but rising social unrest in the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact