

Public outcry halts Australian Border Force blitz in Melbourne

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A politically-orchestrated police show of force was planned for Melbourne last weekend, featuring the first on-the-spot visa checks by the Abbott government's recently-created Australian Border Force (ABF). However, it was abruptly cancelled within hours on Friday amid protests and public outrage.

Friday morning's announcement of the ABF-Victoria Police operation—dubbed Operation Fortitude—raised the spectre of armed para-military ABF officers interrogating people on the streets of central Melbourne who appeared to be of foreign descent, under the threat of them being hauled away for detention if they could not prove their citizenship or visa status.

An outcry on social media, combined with messages of protest from ethnic community organisations and a protest by about 300 people at the city's central Flinders Street train station forced the abandonment of a provocative police-ABF media conference outside the station.

Victoria Police then called off Operation Fortitude altogether. According to the ABF's Friday media release, the operation intended to swamp the inner city with police on Friday and Saturday night “targeting everything from antisocial behaviour to outstanding warrants.” The media reported that the “huge multi-agency operation,” jointly conducted with ABF, public transport, sheriff's and taxi commission officers, would also feature “detection dogs,” “booze buses” and automated number-plate recognition vehicles.

Once Operation Fortitude was halted, damage control set in. Prime Minister Tony Abbott denied any prior knowledge of the blitz, as did Victorian state Premier Daniel Andrews. Both Abbott and Andrews insisted that there never was, and never would be, a police operation to target people on the streets for visa checks.

Yet the high-profile weekend operation would not

have been announced without the highest levels of authorisation at both federal and state levels. It was later revealed that federal Immigration Minister Peter Dutton's office was twice sent briefing notes, attaching copies of the planned Friday morning ABF news release.

ABF chief Roman Quaedvlieg claimed that the media release was a badly-worded mistake at a “low level” in his command. But a senior ABF officer—its Victorian and Tasmanian commander, Don Smith—was directly quoted in the release, declaring: “ABF officers will be positioned at various locations around the CBD [central business district] speaking with any individual we cross paths with. You need to be aware of the conditions of your visa; if you commit visa fraud you should know it's only a matter of time before you're caught out.”

This statement was not made for operational purposes. In fact, it would have alerted anyone with a visa problem to stay out of the inner city on Friday and Saturday night. The threat was issued to send a wider political message, reinforcing the government's intent to crackdown on so-called “illegals” accused of overstaying visas or working without the permission of the immigration authorities.

The media release heralded the extension of the ABF's “compliance field-work,” which already include raids on workplaces, onto the streets of a major city. “We're very proud to be able to support each of our organisations to achieve our common mission of promoting a secure and cohesive society here in Melbourne,” it stated. “Operation Fortitude will be launched by representatives from each participating agency at 2pm today on the steps of Flinders Street Railway Station.”

The media release pointed to the underlying militarisation of the border control, immigration and

refugee regime via the establishment of the ABF, which came into force on July 1. Dressed in military-style uniforms, its officers can carry guns, demand identity papers and detain any person they “reasonably suspect” is an “unlawful non-citizen.”

Despite backing away from Operation Fortitude, Abbott made clear that the ABF’s overall offensive would continue. He denounced people for “pillorying” the ABF “on the basis of a badly-worded press release.”

Federal Labor Party leader Bill Shorten performed an even more cynical apparent about-face than Abbott. Originally, on Friday morning, he praised the government’s operation to “make sure that people are not overstaying their visas.” Shorten only cast doubt on the tactical wisdom of “telegraphing” the “blitz” to the media beforehand.

Once the Operation Fortitude was abandoned, Shorten changed his tune. The Labor leader claimed it took some time for him to realise that the operation was a bad “police-state” look for Melbourne. On Saturday, he described the saga as one of the Abbott government’s most “catastrophically silly” ideas because, “I don’t think there’s a single Victorian and indeed a single Australian whose jaw just didn’t hit the ground.”

Far from opposing the ABF crackdown itself, Labor’s objection was that by “telegraphing” it to the public, the government aroused popular opposition.

In fact, it was the previous Labor government, under Justice Minister Jason Clare, that first conceived the ABF. The Border Force Bill to establish the agency passed the Senate with Labor’s support on May 14. Shorten, in a joint statement with Labor’s immigration spokesman, Richard Marles, said the ABF would “play a crucial role in ensuring the integrity of Australia’s borders.”

The 10 Green senators were alone in voting against the Border Force Bill, but only on limited grounds. They restated their commitment to the underlying “border control” framework, which serves to victimise and scapegoat refugees, students and workers seeking to live and work in Australia.

“The Australian Greens accept it is imperative to Australian national security that rigorous immigration and customs laws be enforced by professional, well-trained personnel,” the Greens’ spokesperson Senator

Sarah Hansen-Young told the Senate on May 14. She opposed the bill on the basis that such laws and personnel already existed, and would not be strengthened by “the cynical rebranding of this service as a ‘border force’.”

After the passage of the Border Force Act, doctors, lawyers and others raised widespread objections to its secrecy provisions. Any person, including a medical worker or other contractor employed by the ABF or immigration authorities, can be jailed for up to two years for exposing abuses committed within detention centres.

There was no discussion in the corporate media, however, of the draconian powers handed to ABF officers, under the Migration Act, to stop and question someone they “reasonably suspect is a non-citizen.”

ABF officers can demand to see ID papers and, if not satisfied, “must” detain that person. In practice, this means systematic “racial profiling”—targetting anyone with a “foreign” appearance.

Operation Fortitude is not an aberration. It is part of the broader political agenda of the Abbott government, backed by the opposition Labor Party, to hype up “national security” and to vilify refugees to divert attention from the rapid deterioration of the economy and deepening assaults on social spending and the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class.



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