

Australian PM unveils plan for indefinite detention of “terrorists”

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Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday suddenly announced a plan to imprison those convicted of terrorist-related offences indefinitely and quickly won agreement from all state and territory leaders, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

The bipartisan rush at the Council of Australian Governments meeting to embrace Turnbull’s previously unheard-of proposal highlights how last month’s Paris terror attacks are being seized upon by the political establishment, like its international counterparts, to introduce further unprecedented attacks on fundamental legal and democratic rights, combined with an accelerated war drive in the Middle East.

Turnbull’s announcement came amid media appearances and speeches by his predecessor, Tony Abbott, who was ousted in September, to stir up anti-Muslim xenophobia and call for ground troops to be deployed to Syria and Iraq on the pretext of fighting Islamic State (ISIS).

In a similar manner to Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump in the US, Abbott has become a vehicle for openly espousing the racist and militarist conceptions. Far from individual rants, however, these views express the political logic of the entire “war on terror” over the past 15 years to justify both the predatory US-led wars that have devastated Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, and repressive laws at home.

Turnbull’s move has the character of seeking to outflank Abbott by demonstrating that he is just as committed as Abbott to imposing draconian anti-terror laws. The proposed indefinite detention come on top of a barrage of “counter-terrorism” measures since the 9/11 attacks in the US, and five further tranches of legislation over the past year, giving the police and spy agencies vast powers, including to conduct mass on-line surveillance.

No details have been provided, but Turnbull’s scheme will allow governments and their security agencies, with the approval of a senior judge, to keep in prison indefinitely anyone jailed for any “terrorist” offence, until they prove they are “reformed” or no longer “a threat.” Almost

certainly that will mean prisoners languishing in maximum-security cells, long after their sentences have been served, unless they agree to cooperate with the authorities, quite possibly as informers.

This regime, which will apply retrospectively to the 13 men currently in prison and the 25 young men and teenagers awaiting trial, will overturn the basic precept of no detention without sentencing by a court. As the result of previous hysterical scare campaigns against “pedophiles” and “violence” over the past two decades, some Australian states already have reactionary indefinite detention laws for repeated child sex offenders and prisoners convicted of murder or other serious violence offences.

Such “preventative” imprisonment orders require no proof of any proposed, or even intent to commit a further offence. They overturn the rule that criminal offences must be proved “beyond a reasonable doubt”—a longstanding principle to protect against victimisations and frame-ups.

Turnbull’s measures will go even further because none of those convicted or charged with terrorist offences in Australia have actually committed a terrorist act in the first place. They have been accused of “preparing” or “conspiring” to conduct an attack, invariably on tenuous evidence, under terrorist law provisions that require no proof of any specific plot—not even location, time or method.

How far these provisions can go was illustrated by yesterday’s arrests in Sydney of five people, including a 15-year-old boy, for allegedly “conspiring to conduct an act in preparation of a terrorist act.” No concrete plot or target was identified in the handwritten scraps of notes that police reportedly discovered. Australian Federal Police (AFP) deputy commissioner Mike Phelan described the plot as “evolving.” There was “one mention” of an AFP building as a target, “but they get the address wrong,” he said.

Yet, if any of the group, including the boy, were convicted of the vague charge against them, they could end up in jail for the rest of their lives.

Police could provide no evidence of a planned attack despite the group being kept under constant electronic and

physical surveillance since sweeping police raids on homes across Sydney in September 2014. Police said the group's phones were bugged, their homes and cars were fitted with listening devices and undercover teams tracked their every move.

The intensive surveillance operation highlights the extensive powers that the police and intelligence apparatus already has to supposedly detect terrorist planning. In addition, the laws passed since 9/11 include powers to impose preventative detention orders as well as repeated 12-month control orders, which can amount to house arrest.

Labor Party leaders were among the first to proclaim their agreement with Turnbull's plan. Federal Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese said his "gut instinct" was "to be supportive of such a proposal." Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews declared: "We've got to give our police the resources they need and we've got to give them the powers they need to keep us safe."

This bipartisan line-up has occurred in a definite political context. Throughout the week, in media commentaries and interviews, Abbott has insinuated that all Muslims were responsible for terrorism and declared that Islam needed to undergo a version of Christianity's Reformation. Islam, Abbott asserted, was inferior to "Western culture," which does not "think you can kill in the name of God."

These deliberately provocative remarks are calculated to stir up anti-Islamic prejudices, as a means to divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines, justify further police-state measures and drum up support for military interventions. As well as being historically false, they also stand current reality on its head. It is the US and its allies, with Australia in the forefront, that are responsible for the killing of more than one million people since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and inflaming the entire region.

In response to Abbott's remarks, Turnbull adopted a different pitch, saying it would be a mistake to "tag" all Muslims as responsible for terrorism. His orientation is toward incorporating the Muslim elites into police and intelligence operations. But his detention plan underscores the underlying unity within ruling circles on using the "war on terror" to bolster the powers of the state apparatus, which are directed not simply at marginalised and vulnerable Islamic youth but at preparing for future social and political unrest as economic conditions worsen.

These debates and preparations also intersect with the rising geo-strategic tensions being generated by the intensifying US war drive in the Middle East and against Russia and China.

Abbott this week presented a lecture in Singapore, hosted by a high-profile British thinktank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, in which he urged a re-escalated

commitment of Western ground troops to Syria and Iraq. He brushed aside the catastrophes already inflicted by previous interventions in Iraq and Libya, saying they just "ended badly."

Abbott spelled out the neo-colonial nature of the interventions, declaring their aim not just to "destroy the caliphate" but to "foster governments in the Middle East that don't commit genocide against their own people or permit terrorism against ours." In other words, for all the claims to be fighting Islamic State, the real goal is to install puppet regimes, which in Syria means the overturn of the Assad government.

Abbott aligned himself with those in Washington criticising the Obama administration for not sending in more troops, saying the US deployment of 200 special forces soldiers showed the country was "finally edging towards the action needed to win this war." Turnbull has previously rejected calls to send ground troops to Iraq and Syria, citing the lack of any request from Washington for such assistance.

Abbott declared this week his intention to remain in parliament for now. The recent speeches and interviews indicate that he is being promoted and used to keep pressure on Turnbull, who is regarded in Washington as not being as unconditionally committed as Abbott to its militarist agenda.

Whatever the immediate calculations of Turnbull and Abbott, the adoption of the indefinite detention plan demonstrates a definite political logic—the turn to increasingly repressive state powers amid escalating wars and deteriorating social and economic conditions.



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