

Australian Federal Police raid Labor Party frontbencher

Nick Beams
20 May 2016

The campaign for the July 2 Australian election took a sharp turn last night when the federal police raided the offices of Labor Party shadow minister Stephen Conroy and the home of a Labor staffer, Andy Byrne, over the alleged leaking of documents involving the rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN).

Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers first searched the Melbourne offices of Conroy, the former opposition communications spokesman, then arrived at Byrne's home, accompanied by media crews. Police spent all night, until 7 a.m., trawling through the house, reportedly looking at campaign material, policy documents and computers. Byrne was an aide to Conroy, the communications minister in the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, and is currently an adviser to Labor's communications spokesman, Jason Clare.

Journalists and others may also be targeted by the AFP operation. According to media reports, AFP warrants have been issued against media organisations, including the public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

The most sensitive documents allegedly formed the basis of an article published in the Fairfax media in February. The article quoted an internal NBN report marked "commercial in confidence" and "for office use only" that detailed a series of rising problems in the rollout.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was communications minister in the Tony Abbott-led Liberal-National Coalition government before he ousted Abbott in an inner-party coup last September to become Liberal Party leader and prime minister. As communications minister, Turnbull was responsible for the decision to make the NBN operate through fibre-to-the-node, with the final stage of upgraded Internet services to be delivered by copper wire. The previous

Labor government had planned for fibre-to-the-home, which was claimed to provide a faster service.

Turnbull insisted the Liberal-National plan would deliver NBN services faster, more affordable and sooner. But according to the leaked documents, the NBN rollout was affected by numerous problems and had fallen two-thirds behind its rollout timetable.

Speaking on the ABC's "Lateline" program as news of the raids broke, Labor's shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus said they were "unprecedented and extraordinary events" during an election campaign. "The government has a great deal of explaining to do," he said.

Dreyfus said the government had to answer when it was informed of the decision to conduct the raids and what it knew about the investigation. He said there had been more than 20 serious leaks under the Abbott and Turnbull governments but none had resulted in an AFP investigation.

The government claimed it only knew of the police raids once they were under way, but Dreyfus said there were guidelines on how the AFP "is to conduct itself in relation to political—politically sensitive matters. They require that the government be briefed." He said that with the calling of the election, government administration was in caretaker mode and the opposition also should have been briefed.

In another interview on ABC radio, Dreyfus said he was concerned about what pressure the government applied to NBNCo, the corporation in charge of the rollout, to go after whistle-blowers, in order to conceal what occurred under Turnbull.

In a statement on the raids, the AFP said they were conducted as part of a referral from NBNCo last December about leaked material. "This investigation has been undertaken independent of government, and

decisions regarding yesterday's activities were made by the AFP alone," it said. The government and the opposition were informed of the raids after they commenced.

The obvious question is why the raids were conducted six months after the initial referral by NBNCo and then launched in the middle of an election campaign, where the administration of the broadband network is a contentious political issue.

Labor frontbencher Tony Burke said the leaks had done "immense damage" to Turnbull because they revealed the cost blowout under his plan, and that the NBN service would be slower and delayed. He contrasted the actions in this case with previous leaks, some of them involving the national security committees of cabinet, but which had not resulted in police raids.

Speaking in Tasmania, where he was campaigning, Turnbull said the raids were "entirely a matter for the AFP" and it operated "entirely independent of the government."

While the government has adopted an attitude of "plausible denial," the political context of the raids is highly significant. The Liberal-National Coalition had based its election campaign on the hope that the government would receive a popularity boost from its May 3 budget. Its centrepiece was the reduction of corporate tax rates from 30 to 25 percent over the next decade, costing around \$50 billion, which the government claimed would stimulate the economy in line with Turnbull's claim that these are "exciting times" in which to live.

This effort to promote "trickle down" economics has run into social reality—widening social inequality, stagnant or falling real wages and the impact of ongoing cuts to basic services such as health and education. Turnbull was judged to have lost a debate with Labor leader Bill Shorten last Friday and was clearly regarded as being unable to answer Shorten's populist calls to maintain education and other spending, and investigate the practices of the major banks.

Opinion polls show a negative reaction to the budget, with one recording only 17 percent support for its measures. On Wednesday, a clear shift in the government's campaigning took place with Immigration Minister Peter Dutton launching a vicious attack on refugees. He said a proposal to increase the

humanitarian intake would see many "illiterate and innumerate" refugees, living off welfare, receiving health benefits and taking Australian jobs.

This shift recalls the 2001 election when the Howard Coalition government, facing defeat, invoked a refugee crisis and exploited the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US. Dutton's offensive was clearly decided at the highest levels. Questioned on Dutton's comments, Turnbull praised him as an "outstanding immigration minister" and television news coverage that night featured Turnbull inspecting "border security" vessels.

The election campaign has also been accompanied this week by numbers of arrests and allegations of terrorist plots, at least one of which involved entrapment by undercover police agents in "sting" operations.

More details of the AFP raids may emerge in the coming days, possibly revealing the extent of government involvement. But they have already underlined the injection of "national security" scares and police operations into the centre of the election campaign.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact