

Government, media stoke fear following latest terrorist allegations in Australia

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1 August 2017

An extraordinary media and political campaign is underway in Australia to allege the guilt of four Sydney men detained by police on Saturday on vague and untested accusations of plotting to bring down a passenger flight.

To help create an atmosphere of “terrorist” emergency, the authorities yesterday threw airports around the country into chaos, as passengers waited for security checks in long queues that snaked out of terminals.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his ministers took to the airwaves to declare such measures were essential to ensure the “safety” of the Australian people, insisting this was their sole concern. Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten and his shadow ministers were also on the frontline, declaring their gratitude to the police and intelligence services for averting an atrocity.

Turnbull fanned the campaign by claiming that the plot was “advanced” and fuelled by “an Islamist extremist motivation.” He asserted: “Police will allege they had the intent and were developing the capability.”

As of this morning, however, no charges had been laid against the men. Instead, police were scouring their homes and rubbish bins and even digging up their yards, in an apparent search for evidence that could be used against them. Police said the searches could last another three days.

Yet the corporate media is awash with claims of a fanciful plan to take a metal kitchen meat grinder through airport security and onto a plane as a mechanism to either emit deadly fumes or explode a bomb.

Two of the men were “reported to be” related to “notorious” Islamic State (ISIS) fighters in Syria, which would indicate they have been under police or intelligence monitoring for months. In an apparent bid to bolster the media allegations, today’s *Australian* reported: “Travel documentation and handwritten notes were among items seized from the properties raided at the weekend,

suggesting the men may have been preparing to book tickets.”

If the men are ultimately charged with conspiracy or other terrorist-related offences, it will be virtually impossible for them to receive a fair trial. Their identities and photos have been splashed all over front pages and television screens, with prejudicial headlines, such as “Tough terror laws thwart jihadis’ mass murder plot.”

The police have admitted having no information about the exact nature of the alleged plot, its timing, location or targeting. Australian Federal Police Commissioner Andrew Colvin said yesterday: “Until we finish our investigation, until we know which of our many working theories we have, and until we can put that information before the courts, it’s not helpful to keep speculating.”

According to unsubstantiated media reports, the federal and state police felt compelled to detain the men after US and UK intelligence agencies intervened, with the British spy service apparently threatening to issue a travel alert for Australia unless the men were rounded up.

These reports, presumably based on leaks by sources in the police-intelligence apparatus, point to two possibilities. One is that the authority of the US-led “Five Eyes” global surveillance network is being invoked to lend credibility to the Australian allegations.

The other is that the American and British agencies triggered the dramatic police arrests and raids on five homes across Sydney as a means of bolstering the “Five Eyes” network, which links spy agencies in the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This enormous surveillance network has been publicly exposed by WikiLeaks’ and Edward Snowden’s revelations of its worldwide spying on millions of people.

The WSWS has no means of determining whether there is any truth in the media accusations. But we urge our readers to adhere to the fundamental legal and democratic principle of “innocent until proven guilty,” which has

been established through centuries of struggle against frame-ups and victimisations by absolutist regimes.

There is a clear political agenda behind this scare campaign, as there is with the entire “war on terrorism” mounted since 2001. This “war” has nothing to do with protecting the public from terrorism.

Instead, its focus is providing ongoing justifications for invading the resource-rich and strategically located Middle East. At the same time, it has been utilised domestically as the pretext for the development of unprecedented police and intelligence powers, which will ultimately be used to suppress growing social and political discontent in the working class and among young people.

The timing of the current “terrorist” outcry is particularly significant. It was launched amid preparations to dispatch more Australian military forces to the Middle East and the Philippines, on the pretext of combating ISIS. The Liberal-National government, backed by the Labor Party, is also currently boosting and restructuring the official apparatus of mass surveillance and police-state powers in the country.

This revamping, which is in line with moves by the US and its “Five Eyes” partners, includes:

- * Legislation to compel social media companies to provide the security agencies with the tools to decrypt all communications.

- * New laws to expedite powers to call out the military to suppress domestic unrest.

- * A new “Home Affairs” super-ministry to centralise control of the federal police and intelligence forces, the immigration department and the anti-refugee Australian Border Force.

- * A US-style Office of National Intelligence, headed by a Director-General of National Intelligence, located in the prime minister’s office, to take control of an expanded network of internal and external surveillance agencies.

It is worth recalling the last time, a decade ago, that the federal police made prominent use of powers handed to them after 2001 to detain suspects for “investigation” for many days without charge. This is a basic violation of the principle of habeas corpus—no detention without trial.

In 2007, the arrest of an Indian Muslim doctor, Mohamed Haneef, was surrounded by a similar blaze of media hysteria, including allegations that he planned to blow up a Gold Coast residential tower. After being held for 12 days without charge, he was eventually charged with “providing support to a terrorist (unnamed) organisation.” The charges collapsed within days, once

his lawyers courageously leaked to reporters the flimsy details of the police accusations, forcing the Howard Liberal-National government to arrange for his release and rapid return to India.

The Haneef affair became a major embarrassment for the police and intelligence agencies, and for the Howard government, contributing to its landslide election defeat several months later. But the ensuing Labor governments of 2007 to 2013, and the subsequent Liberal-National governments of Tony Abbott and Turnbull, have only continued to expand the powers and resources of these agencies.

Even the official definition of terrorism—already broad enough to cover many forms of political protest—has been further widened, including to cover “advocating” or “supporting” acts that could be directed against Australian military operations overseas.

Last week’s release of the unclassified version of an intelligence review ordered by the Turnbull government, shed light on the real concerns that lie behind this security buildup. The report warned that “the global strategic influence of the United States has declined in relative terms and that trajectory is set to continue,” and the resulting international tensions and instabilities are “exacerbating a growing sense of insecurity and alienation.”

In the coming period, the methods of police raids, media witch-hunts and political insinuations will not be confined to alleged Islamic extremists. The precedents set by such operations will increasingly be utilised to suppress those opposing intensifying social inequality and the escalating drive to war.



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