

Leaked documents expose plans for internal surveillance by Australia's electronic spy agency

Mike Head
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For months, high-level Australian government preparations have been underway to allow the country's electronic surveillance agency, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), to access emails, bank records, text messages and other sensitive data of citizens and other domestic residents without their knowledge.

These plans, partly revealed by the publication of internal documents leaked to the media this week, indicate a ruling class anxious about mounting domestic disaffection and unrest.

The ASD, originally a military agency named the Defence Signals Directorate, operates interception equipment capable of capturing the communications of millions of people, as part of the global Five Eyes network led by the US National Security Agency (NSA).

Under existing legislation, the ASD is meant to spy only on foreign citizens and governments, unless it obtains a ministerial warrant to target individual Australians. In reality, it has long side-stepped this limited restriction by sharing data with the NSA and its British, Canadian and New Zealand partners.

A leaked letter from Mike Pezzullo, the secretary of the new Home Affairs super-ministry, to his Defence Department counterpart Greg Moriarty, showed that the government is planning to sweep aside legal restrictions and conduct mass surveillance of the Australian population.

An unnamed intelligence source reportedly told the *Sunday Telegraph* the letter outlined "step-in" powers that could force banks, telecoms and companies to hand over citizens' data.

There is clear evidence, despite subsequent denials, that the relevant cabinet ministers, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton and Defence Minister Marise Payne, discussed the plans.

In March, a ministerial submission signed by ASD chief Mike Burgess, stated: "The Department of Home Affairs advises that it is briefing the Minister for Home Affairs to write to you (Ms Payne) seeking your support for a further tranche of legislative reform to enable ASD to better support a range of Home Affairs priorities."

Such was the government's fear of public opposition that the three named officials, Moriarty, Pezzullo and Burgess, quickly issued an unprecedented joint statement on Sunday asserting that there was "no proposal to increase the ASD's powers to collect intelligence on Australians or to covertly access their private data."

The statement claimed: "We would never provide advice to government suggesting that ASD be allowed to have unchecked data collection on Australians—this can only ever occur within the law, and under very limited and controlled circumstances."

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop also went into damage control on Monday. She denied any knowledge of the leaked plans and said she saw no "security gap" that would justify them. Dutton, however, yesterday publicly advocated a domestic role for the ASD, claiming it was needed to combat cyber attacks and child sexual exploitation.

Documents released by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden in 2013 revealed that the ASD already hands over to the NSA and its global partners so-called metadata of the phone calls, texts, emails, on-line address books and social media posts of millions of people in Australia and across the Asia-Pacific region.

One document recorded that in just one day, in January 2012, a previously undisclosed NSA program "harvested" 712,336 email address books globally, of which 311,113, or more than 40 percent, were provided by the ASD.

Earlier leaks by Snowden showed that the ASD tapped

the phone calls of then Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and that Australian embassies throughout Asia operate as electronic listening posts for the US-led spying network.

Moreover, during the past four decades, and especially since the “war on terrorism” was declared in 2001, successive Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments have handed the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency, and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) vast powers and resources to monitor and compile intelligence on Australians.

Last year, the current Coalition government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull took this state apparatus build-up to a new level by establishing the Home Affairs Ministry to take command of seven surveillance and enforcement agencies, including ASIO, the AFP, the Australian Border Force (ABF) and the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC).

The ASD was elevated into a statutory body but remained part of the Defence Department because of its direct involvement in supplying battlefield, cyber warfare and other information to the military.

Turnbull also announced the creation of a new US-style Office of National Intelligence (ONI) in the prime minister’s office, to establish centralised control over all the internal and external spy agencies. This includes the ASD, as well as the overseas spy agency, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) and the military’s agency, the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO).

The Labor Party gave bipartisan backing to this unprecedented concentration of police-state powers, consistent with its own long record in office of bolstering the intelligence apparatus. Once the ASD plan was leaked, Labor leaders feigned concern about the accumulation of power in the hands of Dutton’s Home Affairs Ministry, but did not oppose the proposal itself.

Labor’s primary orientation was to attack the government for supposedly failing to protect “national security” because top-secret documents were leaked. Shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus wrote to Turnbull asking him to investigate how such highly sensitive national security information was handed to the media. The government subsequently launched an AFP investigation into the leak.

Deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek said the leaking of a “top-secret, for Australian-eyes-only, document” pointed to divisions within the government. She said Labor was happy to work with the government on

national security, but had not been consulted on this plan and needed to know why any changes were necessary.

The Turnbull government’s reorganisation of the security apparatus is driven by concerns about the global turmoil and uncertainties produced by the Trump administration, the decline in the hegemony of the United States—to which the fortunes of Australian capitalism have been tied since World War II—and the rise of seething discontent in every country, including Australia, generated by ever-greater social inequality.

An intelligence review report prepared at Turnbull’s request last year stated that Australia’s “national security environment” was being re-shaped by intensifying conflicts between the major powers and “a growing sense of insecurity and alienation.”

In Australia, no government has lasted a full three-year term since 2007 because of widespread opposition to the bipartisan program of austerity, war plans and boosting the powers of the police, intelligence and military agencies.

The government’s nervousness about the leaked plan reflects its awareness of underlying hostility toward the surveillance agencies, particularly since the false intelligence claims about “weapons of mass destruction” used to invade Iraq in 2003 and the disclosures of Snowden and WikiLeaks, led by Julian Assange. WikiLeaks revealed many atrocities and war crimes, as well as regime-change coups and intrigues, committed by the US and its allies, including Australia.

Both the Coalition and Labor portray “national security” as being about protecting the Australian population. The opposite is true. Those in ruling circles are preoccupied with suppressing widespread opposition to their preparations for war and to the deepening attacks on the jobs, wages and social conditions of working class people.



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