

New laws tabled in Australia to deploy troops to suppress domestic unrest

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28 June 2018

Federal government ministers will be able to swiftly call out Special Air Services (SAS) commandos and other military forces, including with “shoot to kill” powers, to put down riots and protests under legislation introduced into the Australian parliament today.

The Liberal-National government claims that expedited military call-out laws are mainly intended to deal with terrorist incidents. But the powers extend far beyond terrorism. Attorney-General Christian Porter told journalists the military could be used to restore order in case of “widespread rioting.”

The “war on terrorism” is again being exploited to create police-state powers whose purpose is to suppress political dissent and social unrest, under conditions of declining working class living conditions, widening social inequality and preparations for war.

The Defence Amendment (Call Out of the Australian Defence Force) Bill is a further expansion of the military call-out provisions—they were already significantly increased in 2000 and 2006.

The bill comes on top of more than 70 packages of “counter-terrorism” laws since 2001 and the far-reaching, anti-democratic “foreign interference” bills being pushed through the Senate today.

Porter said he found it “inconceivable” that any future federal government could abuse the call-out powers, because the threshold to deploy the military remains high.

In reality, the legislation will hand almost limitless power to the prime minister or two other “authorising” ministers to mobilise the armed forces for domestic purposes. The only requirement is that they consider the military’s deployment can “enhance” the operations of state and federal police.

Previously, as per the Australian Constitution, a state or territory government had to request military

assistance to deal with “domestic violence” beyond their means. Under the new laws, the federal government need not wait for such an invitation, in order to protect “Commonwealth interests” or “critical infrastructure.”

Moreover, a state or territory government can request a military call-out, even if their police forces have the capacity to respond themselves.

“Domestic violence”—a formulation in the Australian Constitution—can include protests outside parliaments, clashes with police or crippling industrial action. “Terrorism” also has been defined since 2002 in far-reaching terms, with the potential to cover many kinds of political opposition or dissent.

Porter said likely scenarios included sieges in which “the very specialist skills of the Commando or SAS regiments” could help police.

Over the past 17 years, the Special Forces have spearheaded the Australian involvement in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, specialising in night-time raids on homes, in which innocent civilians have been killed. The government is currently trying to cover-up new evidence of assassinations and other war crimes committed by the SAS in these invasions.

Commando forces have been trained for similar use at home. Since 2001, two Special Forces contingents have been established for domestic interventions—the Tactical Assault Group (TAG)-East, based in Sydney, and TAG-West, based in Perth.

These units were created on the pretext of fighting terrorism, just like Australian involvement in the predatory US-led wars in the Middle East. The real aim of the “war on terrorism” has been to assert US hegemony over the Middle East and justify the erection of a repressive apparatus at home.

Speaking on the “shoot-to-kill” powers, Porter said

“any force exercised must be reasonable and necessary in the circumstances.” He said the “same limitations” apply to the police. Such provisos have not stopped more than 100 police killings in Australia since 1989.

Moreover, Special Forces members are specifically trained, and armed with lethal weapons, to kill. The military’s “shoot to kill” powers also can be used with legal impunity—a defence of following “superior orders” was inserted in the Defence Act in 2006.

State police will remain in charge of incidents, but military commanders will be able to make urgent decisions to use lethal force. Currently, military officers can issue orders to shoot down alleged air-borne threats—a power introduced for the 2000 Sydney Olympics—but this will be expanded to other threats as well.

The new bill will expand the military’s powers, including by adding “special powers” that can be authorised by the defence minister. Once deployed, soldiers will be able to take over buildings, detain people, search premises and confiscate possessions. They can also issue commands to civilians, interrogate them, seize documents, erect barriers and commandeer vehicles.

The bill will further allow the armed forces to be “pre-authorised” to respond to threats on land, at sea and in the air, and for major political and sporting events. Fighter jets and attack helicopters could be scrambled to deal with threats to events from the air.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull first outlined the proposed changes last July. Over the past year there have been closed-door discussions with the state and territory governments, both Liberal-National and Labor.

The Labor Party is expected to support the legislation on a bipartisan basis, as it has with every expansion of the powers and resources of the police, intelligence and military apparatus.

As Turnbull did last July, Attorney-General Porter cited the December 2014 Sydney café siege, by lone gunman Man Haron Monis, which ended in the deaths of two hostages.

“What the Lindt cafe siege demonstrated is that there was a very high and very inflexible threshold pursuant to which you could have the ADF [Australian Defence Force] participate in a response designed to help protect Australian citizens,” Porter said.

The government falsely labelled the siege a terrorist attack and claimed it demonstrated the need for the SAS to have the capacity to intervene with lethal force. Like many similar incidents around the world, the café hostage-taking was perpetrated by a mentally-disturbed individual, who was long under close surveillance by police and intelligence agencies.

Calling out the military onto the streets overturns a centuries-old principle, derived from the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in Britain, against the use of the armed forces against civilians domestically.

Specific domestic call-out laws were first introduced, with no public debate, in 2000, under the guise of protecting the Sydney Olympics from terrorists. They were expanded in 2006, on the excuse of shielding the Melbourne Commonwealth Games, even though no terrorist threats were made to either event.

The Australian population was last confronted by heavily-armed soldiers on the streets in 1978. The Fraser government seized upon the still-unexplained Sydney Hotel bomb incident to place 1,500 armed troops, with armoured personnel carriers and helicopters, along a major highway on Sydney’s outskirts and in the nearby town of Bowral.

Although no military call-out has occurred since 1978, major events—from the 2000 Sydney Olympics to the 2014 G20 summit in Brisbane—have been accompanied by displays of military might, as well as huge police mobilisations.

Frequent “counter-terrorism” exercises have been conducted in major cities, featuring military helicopters and Special Forces commandos. These operations have sought to condition public opinion to accept such military interventions, as well as test out methods for combatting eruptions of social and political discontent.



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