

“Five Eyes” summit in Australia ramps up internet censorship

Mike Head
5 September 2018

A meeting of key cabinet members from the US-led Five Eyes global spying network, held in Australia on August 28-29, shed light on the ousting of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull three days earlier, as well as the intensifying social media censorship.

Despite the high-profile character of the gathering, the event received almost no publicity. Australian Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton hosted the summit. Leading the other delegations were US Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen and UK Home Secretary Sajid Javid, along with Canada’s Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale and New Zealand Justice Minister Andrew Little.

As exposed by ex-US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013, the five-country intelligence web conducts bugging, hacking and other forms of mass surveillance over the world’s population, as well as targeted governments. Its cyber warfare operations are dedicated to tracking and suppressing political and social discontent and preparing for wars to reassert US global hegemony.

The annual summit of Five Eyes ministers was no doubt scheduled months before Turnbull’s removal on August 24, yet the timing and the contents of the communiqué issued by the meeting point to the escalating demand from Washington for the Australian government and its other partners to commit themselves to front line involvement in any military conflict launched by the US, as well as to taking greater control over the internet.

Dutton, an extreme right-wing figure, notorious for his xenophobic anti-immigrant demagoguery, anti-refugee operations and militarism, chaired the gathering just after failing to replace Turnbull as prime minister. After months of destabilisation of Turnbull by the most right-wing and pro-US elements in the Liberal Party, Dutton

was narrowly defeated by Scott Morrison in a party room leadership ballot.

Despite Dutton falling short in his leadership bid, Morrison quickly reinstated him as home affairs minister, presiding over the central repressive apparatus of the capitalist state—the federal police, intelligence and Border Force agencies. In fact, the governor-general swore Dutton back into office at a special ceremony on August 27, a day before the rest of Morrison’s new ministry, so he could host the Five Eyes meeting.

In the meantime, Morrison, himself a right-wing militarist, had distanced himself from Turnbull by holding a “warm” conversation with US President Donald Trump, who rang to congratulate Morrison a day after he was installed.

During Turnbull’s three years in office, he had repeatedly assured US leaders of his commitment to the US military and intelligence alliance but his government had balked at US requests to send warships and planes to challenge China’s activities in the South China Sea. Moreover, two weeks before he was ousted, Turnbull had given a “reset” speech calling for closer relations with China, Australian capitalism’s biggest export market.

At the two-day summit, the five countries firstly pledged their unity, specifically referring to its foundation through the US victory in World War II. “We reaffirmed that the close and enduring five country partnership, developed following the Second World War, remains fundamental to the security and prosperity of our nations,” the communiqué stated.

Next, the meeting agreed to jointly respond to “severe foreign interference” and publicly brand the governments responsible. Russia and China were not named, but they are clearly the focus of the declaration,

coming amid a barrage of unsubstantiated accusations by the intelligence, political and media establishments against the two countries.

“We condemned foreign interference, being the coercive, deceptive and clandestine activities of foreign governments, actors, and their proxies, to sow discord, manipulate public discourse, bias the development of policy, or disrupt markets for the purpose of undermining our nations and our allies,” the communiqué said.

Under pressure from Washington, Turnbull’s government, backed by the opposition Labor Party, recently pushed through parliament unprecedented “foreign interference” laws, outlawing alleged links to China and many forms of anti-war and other political dissent, particularly involving international campaigns. Morrison’s government will now be expected to launch prosecutions.

The communiqué also denounced tech companies for not meeting with Five Eyes officials to discuss clamping down further on social media. An accompanying “Joint Statement on Countering the Illicit Use of Online Spaces” demanded that the internet conglomerates work more closely with the intelligence and police agencies to detect, identify and “urgently and immediately” remove “illicit content,” including “sources of disinformation” and “forms of malicious foreign interference.”

The meeting insisted that social media companies act on “previous commitments to invest in automated capabilities and techniques (including photo DNA tools) to detect, remove and prevent reupload of illegal and illicit content.”

Unless the companies cooperated, the five governments would work together to force companies to allow law enforcement agencies to access user data. “We may pursue technological, enforcement, legislative or other measures to achieve lawful access solutions,” the statement declared.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) has proven, these governments and their European counterparts are already collaborating with social media companies to implement massive restrictions on internet access. In April 2017, Google announced new algorithms, aimed at limiting or blocking access to the WSWS and other left wing, anti-war and progressive websites. Facebook and Twitter have adopted similar measures.

The WSWS has taken the lead in exposing this conspiracy to censor the internet and called for the formation of an International Coalition of Socialist, Anti-War and Progressive Websites to fight back against this attack on freedom of speech and basic democratic rights.

The Five Eyes edicts signal an even more draconian offensive. A statement on combatting “ubiquitous encryption” declared the necessity to crack open “end-to-end encryption” tools allegedly used for “terrorist and criminal activities.”

Aware of the importance of encryption for online retail, banking and other corporate and financial purposes, the statement denied any “intention to weaken encryption mechanisms.” Nevertheless, the five governments “agreed to the urgent need for law enforcement to gain targeted access to data,” subject to further “discussion with industry.”

Under Turnbull, Australia’s Liberal-National government had already unveiled such legislation, tabled in parliament last month. Telcos, internet companies and device manufacturers that refuse to facilitate access to secret data face fines of up to \$10 million.

The intelligence and police forces will have powers to compel any company, via a “Technical Capability Notice” issued by the attorney-general, to build a capability or functionality to provide the information required by agencies.

These powers will be far-reaching, potentially affecting any website. According to government ministers, they will apply to encrypted messaging services such as WhatsApp, as well as “any entity operating a website.”

The Five Eyes summit underscores the need to develop the struggle against this ever-increasing internet censorship, together with the drive toward war and police-state rule, and to root it in the working class, the only social force capable of defending fundamental democratic rights and freedom of expression.



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