

Bipartisan push to ramp up police powers after Australia's latest "terror" attack

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The more evidence that emerges about a violent incident in Melbourne on November 9, the more it exposes the doubtful claims of federal and state governments and the complicit media that it was a terrorist attack.

Hassan Khalif Shire Ali, a 30-year-old mentally-ill former Somali refugee who had lived in Australia since childhood, killed a man with a knife, injured others and set alight a car containing gas containers in the city's centre.

Late last week it was revealed that the police and courts had permitted Shire Ali to breach bail on a series of traffic offences. While media commentators immediately agitated for harsher bail laws, his long record of minor convictions and bail violations points to two facts.

Firstly, he was not a terrorist, but a troubled and unstable individual who frequently came to the attention of the authorities. Secondly, he was even more well-known to the police and intelligence agencies than they had previously admitted.

Already it was known that the federal government, acting on the advice of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), had revoked Shire Ali's passport in 2015, allegedly because ASIO had evidence he wanted to travel to Syria. That alone pointed to the police and ASIO closely monitoring him and his family, including a younger brother whom ASIO had sought to recruit as a paid informant.

None of these facts have stopped the Labor Party joining the Liberal-National government in exploiting the incident to try to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment and expand the already vast powers of the police-intelligence apparatus.

Last week the Labor Party accused Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton of lying when he claimed that

Shire Ali's actions showed the necessity for the federal government's proposed bill to crack open internet and phone encryption programs.

There was not the slightest evidence that the authorities had needed to break any encryption codes to conduct surveillance on Shire Ali. Labor's complaint, however, was not that Dutton had falsely claimed that such police powers could have averted the attack. Instead, it was that Dutton had asserted that Labor did not back the encryption bill.

Dutton himself later conceded that he did not know if the government's encryption bill "would have made a difference" in foiling the man's attack. Nevertheless, he claimed, without the slightest explanation, that it "may well have."

Dutton's intervention came after the country's intelligence chiefs, who are part of the US-led global Five Eyes electronic spy network, last month demanded the passage of the Telecommunications (Assistance and Access) Bill 2018 despite alarmed submissions by thousands of individuals, as well as social media and telecommunications companies. Companies such as Cisco have shown that the bill will introduce "backdoors" into tech products that will enable the authorities to access private data at will.

But Labor's leaders were outraged because Dutton had suggested that they opposed the encryption bill. Dutton told Sky News that law enforcement agencies needed access to information contained in encrypted messages, such as WhatsApp, to fill a "real gap" in their surveillance capacity. "Now Labor has said that they're opposed to that. I hope that they reassess," he said.

Labor's shadow attorney-general, Mark Dreyfus, wrote to Attorney-General Christian Porter calling on him to pull the home affairs minister into line, so as not

to threaten “the fine record of bipartisanship on national security.” He declared: “As you well know, this is a lie. Labor has never said we are opposed to this legislation.”

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten said his party had helped pass 10 sets of national security legislation since 2014 alone, when he became leader.

Dreyfus’s letter reiterated Labor’s readiness to back the encryption bill after a review by the bipartisan Coalition-Labor parliamentary joint committee on intelligence and security (PJCIS). That review, like the many conducted into “counter-terrorism” bills since 2001, is certain to tick off on the bill after Labor proposes cosmetic amendments to head off public hostility.

The letter said Labor and the government had “worked cooperatively” on national security issues. Since 2014, the PJCIS had made more than 250 recommendations to which the government agreed, making laws “stronger and more effective.”

In other words, Labor’s amendments, often introduced on the pretext of protecting civil liberties, are always designed to bolster the capacity of the police and spy agencies to make use of the measures.

Dreyfus wrote: “Bipartisanship is vitally important in the area of national security—this is as it should be, and Australians rightly expect that such matters remain above politics.”

The truth is that, precisely because of public opposition to police-state measures, and growing distrust of the political establishment, Labor and the Coalition have worked in unison to pass repeated barrages of “terrorism” legislation.

Over the past 17 years, these laws have authorised sweeping phone-tapping and other forms of electronic surveillance, permitted secret detention and questioning by ASIO, and overturned basic legal and democratic rights, such as no imprisonment without trial.

Knowing it will have Labor’s backing, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government has used the Melbourne attack to propose new measures against immigrants. After Morrison declared “the radical and dangerous ideology of extremist Islam” to be “the greatest threat of religious extremism in this country,” Dutton declared that the government would “look at the way in which people are on a pathway to citizenship.”

There has been an equally reactionary bipartisan

response at the state level. Victorian Liberal Party leader Matthew Guy not only backed Morrison’s anti-Muslim propaganda but also accused “African gangs” of “domestic terror.”

Guy said that if he took office after the November 24 state election he would expedite mandatory sentencing laws and deport “violent offenders” on visas. Before Christmas, legislation would be fast-tracked to give police powers to clamp electronic monitoring devices on “suspects” who have been “radicalised towards violence.”

Courts could also impose orders that such people must abide by curfews, avoid designated areas, undergo counselling, attend “anti-radicalisation” and/or drug and alcohol programs, and report regularly to police.

Labor Premier Daniel Andrews’ government quickly sought to outdo the Liberals. Andrews had already telephoned Morrison to congratulate him for his inflammatory comments, and pledged that the state’s police commissioner would receive any further resources the police requested.

A Labor spokesman said it had set up a counter-terrorism command and a Fixated Threat Assessment Centre. “We’re making the biggest investment in Victoria Police in our state’s history, recruiting and deploying an extra 3,135 police to keep people safe in the city, the suburbs and across the state,” the spokesman said.

The Victorian state election campaign has become a testing ground for demonising immigrants and imposing police-state powers, regardless of whether state and federal governments are formed by Labor or the Coalition.

Under the false flag of “keeping people safe,” these measures will increasingly be used against the working class as a whole as economic and social conditions deteriorate, struggles erupt against the attacks on jobs and living standards, and growing numbers of people turn toward a socialist answer to the worsening inequality and danger of war.



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