

New Zealand inquiry set to whitewash fascist murders in Christchurch

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On Monday, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced the terms of reference for the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the March 15 Christchurch fascist attack in which 50 Muslim worshippers were killed.

The alleged mass murderer, 28-year-old Australian Brenton Tarrant, appeared in the High Court in Christchurch on Friday. He faces 50 murder charges and 39 counts of attempted murder, but none so far under the terrorism laws, which would require discussion of his political motivations. It is possible more charges will be added.

The Royal Commission will be led by Supreme Court judge William Young, with one other member still to be appointed. It will begin hearings on May 13 and report back to the governor-general by December 10.

Ardern told reporters: “The government will ensure no stone is left unturned as we examine as quickly as possible how the March 15 attack happened, what could have been done to stop it and how we can keep New Zealanders safe.” She added: “It is important that people’s questions are answered—not by me or by the agencies involved but independently.”

In fact, the Labour-led government and the state are desperately seeking to prevent any discussion of the political motivations for the slaughter. The chief censor last month banned Tarrant’s 74-page fascist “manifesto,” with severe penalties for holding or distributing copies.

The Commission’s terms of reference ensure there will be no examination of the underlying political causes of the tragedy, including the promotion of anti-immigrant xenophobia by the entire political establishment and the broader elevation of far-right parties in Europe, Australia, the US and New Zealand.

This week Ardern defended Winston Peters, deputy prime minister and leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party, which is in coalition with her Labour Party.

Ardern told Radio NZ she would not ask Peters to apologise for his repeated demonisation of Muslims, in language akin to that in Tarrant’s fascist manifesto.

Announcing the inquiry last month, Ardern made clear that it will have a narrow focus, looking primarily at the events leading up to the attack and, in a very limited way, whether the state agencies “could have been in a position” to prevent it.

The minister responsible for the intelligence services, Andrew Little, insisted on TV1 on March 18 that any inquiry would show they “did their jobs.” “[T]hese agencies have done the correct things and done nothing other than fulfil their mandate in terms of security and intelligence,” he declared. Little rejected suggestions that there was too much focus on investigating potential Islamic extremism over far-right organisations.

The inquiry will prepare the way to vastly increase the powers, funding and manning of the intelligence apparatus. The agencies were, according to Ardern, “consulted” on the terms of reference and fully agree with the Commission going ahead, thus ensuring that there will be no real questioning of their failure to see the obvious warning signs.

The terms of reference contain nine main points. Six concern the alleged gunman’s activities before the attack, including: his time in Australia, residence in New Zealand, international travels, how he obtained a gun licence and weapons, and his use of social media and connections with others, within NZ or internationally.

The remaining questions relate to the actions of state agencies, and whether they should have known of the impending attack. These are framed so as to invite the conclusion that the Security Intelligence Service, Government Communications Security Bureau, Police, Customs and Immigration will all require more legal powers and resourcing.

One question is whether there were any “impediments”

to the agencies “gathering or sharing information” relevant to the attack, including “legislative impediments.” Another is whether there was “inappropriate concentration or priority setting” of counter-terrorism “resources.”

One journalist asked how such questions can be answered given that the spy agencies “by their very nature” are secret. Ardern replied that the judge “will have the appropriate security clearances to be able to satisfy himself,” describing Young as having “a sound understanding of intelligence issues.” In other words, he has been vetted by the agencies themselves.

Much information will be kept secret. Nothing will emerge to reveal details of, or jeopardise New Zealand’s standing with, the global US-led Five Eyes intelligence network that spies on the activities of millions of people around the world, including NZ citizens.

The inquiry will not reveal what police and intelligence agencies in Europe, the US and Australia knew or did not know. Tarrant travelled throughout Europe and declared that thousands of police officers and soldiers there were members of far-right nationalist groups, a statement that raises questions about whether he had any contact with state agencies.

Another question that will not be addressed is whether the security services and police were “looking the wrong way” because the far-right nationalist and the anti-communist views expressed by Tarrant and the fascist tendencies that inspired him are shared by the political establishment and the state.

Demands have already been made for the inquiry to be used to overcome widespread popular opposition to increasing the powers of police and the intelligence agencies. Opposition National Party leader Simon Bridges said surveillance and anti-terror laws needed to be revised “with some urgency.”

Bridges claimed that Project Speargun, a program that would have closely scanned internet traffic going to and from New Zealand, was abandoned by the previous National Party government in 2013. This followed protests against mass surveillance by the Five Eyes, exposed by US whistleblower Edward Snowden. Bridges declared that the country’s security risk had “now changed” following the Christchurch attack and the “balance” between privacy and security “must now be reconsidered.”

John Battersby from Massey University’s Centre for Defence and Security Studies complained in the *Dominion Post* on March 29 that the terrorism law had

been rendered “useless,” with changes to the resourcing and powers of agencies “reluctantly made, and only amid protest from various groups opposing intrusion into our civil rights.”

There is a longstanding view in ruling circles that the Terrorism Suppression Act (TSA) is inadequate. In 2007, police conducted raids in the Urewera Ranges in which 40 activists were arrested for allegedly taking part in illegal weapons training. However, charges under the TSA were dropped when the solicitor general declared the evidence did not meet the “high threshold” required to prosecute.

Diplomatic cables from 2007, published in 2011 by WikiLeaks, showed that US ambassador to New Zealand William McCormick criticised the TSA as inadequate “to deal with foreign as well as domestic terrorism.” The 1999–2008 Labour government changed the legislation, significantly removing the power to designate “terrorist” groups from the High Court and placing it in the hands of the prime minister.

Subsequent National and Labour governments also removed many restrictions to surveillance by police and intelligence agencies. However, the political establishment is now seeking to exploit the Christchurch atrocity to provide the pretext for making an even more sweeping increase in police state powers.

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