

Australian Labor Party's hypocrisy on police media raids exposed

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The Labor Party's duplicity on last week's Australian Federal Police (AFP) raids on journalists and media organisations was on graphic display by the end of the week.

The police raids—one on a News Corp journalist's home and the other on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation—were triggered by leaks about the operations of the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) and the Special Air Service (SAS). Both are critical parts of the US-linked military-intelligence apparatus.

The ASD helps its US equivalent, the National Security Agency (NSA), tap the phones and intercept the emails and social media communications of rival governments and millions of people across the Indo-Pacific and around the world. The SAS and related Special Forces contingents have provided all the frontline troops for the Australian contributions to the US-led wars in the Middle East.

At a media conference last Thursday, the AFP's acting commissioner Neil Gaughan declared that the real reason for the raids was to protect the involvement of the Australian police and intelligence agencies in the "Five Eyes" global surveillance network dominated by the US.

Amid a public outcry over the raids, Labor leader Anthony Albanese and his leading shadow cabinet ministers had feigned opposition to the attack on media freedom. But Labor is just as committed as the Liberal-National Coalition to the US military alliance and Washington's intensifying war preparations.

Correspondence published by Nine Media outlets on Friday showed that Labor last year urged the Coalition government to instigate just such a police operation. Shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus wrote to the then prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, in June 2018 formally demanding an investigation into the leaking of

"highly classified" documents to News Corp reporter Annika Smethurst, whose Canberra house was ransacked for seven hours by the police last week.

Smethurst had reported on confidential government correspondence about how the electronic surveillance powers of the ASD could be expanded to legalise their use against domestic political dissent. As the revelations of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden proved in 2013, the ASD already conducts such internal spying on a massive scale, in cooperation with the NSA and other "Five Eyes" partners in Britain, Canada and New Zealand. The leaked correspondence, however, threatened to further alert the public to this sinister global collaboration.

Dreyfus said the "damaging leak" risked undermining Australia's "national security." After receiving Labor's letter, Turnbull promptly ordered the AFP inquiry that led to last week's raid.

Labor's hypocrisy was further exposed last Friday. Albanese and Labor's home affairs shadow minister Kristina Keneally denounced as "breathtaking" an AFP decision not to investigate February's leaking of details of a classified cabinet briefing on a refugee "medevac" bill. In February, Albanese had accused the government of "undermining our national security by leaking classified documents in a strategic way."

The leaked material claimed that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)—the internal political spy agency—had said the bill would undermine the government's "Operation Sovereign Borders" to stop asylum seekers reaching Australia. The "medevac" bill, which the government opposed, allowed for limited and temporary transfers of seriously-ill refugees detained in Australia prison camps on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island to receive medical treatment inside Australia.

There is no doubt that the AFP's decisions to pursue the ASD and SAS leaks, and not the "medevac" bill one, underscore the politically selective use of police raids. However, Labor's response demonstrates the commitment of both the ruling parties to covering up the secrets and crimes of the military-intelligence agencies.

Labor has a similar record on the leaked reports of war crimes committed by the SAS in Afghanistan. When leaks appeared last June about a confidential internal report confirming abuses, such as killing prisoners, children and innocent civilians, Labor called for the partial release of the report, "subject to national security considerations."

Labor's concern was not to lay bare the atrocities conducted by the SAS as an inevitable part of the brutal US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. It was to help the authorities sweep the matter under the table by portraying the abuses as aberrations committed by individual "bad apples" in the elite commando units.

When it was last in office, Labor was just as concerned as the Coalition to whitewash SAS war crimes. In May 2013, Stephen Smith, Labor's defence minister, rejected complaints by Afghan detainees that they were subjected to humiliating public searches of groin and buttocks areas, as well as poor food and cold cells.

After years of cover-up, former Australian military lawyer, David McBride, allegedly handed some of the incriminating internal inquiry material to journalists in 2017. He is due to go on trial in the Australian Capital Territory Supreme Court on June 13, and faces potential life imprisonment if convicted of leaking the documents.

For years, Labor has joined hands with the Coalition to pass US-backed legislation handing unprecedented powers to the police and intelligence agencies. This has included "counter-terrorism" laws, the 2015 metadata retention provisions, the 2018 encryption-cracking measures and the 2018 "foreign interference" legislation, which expanded the scope and penalties of the secrecy laws.

By targeting journalists for charges under the "official secrets" provisions of the Crimes Act, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government is taking its lead from the Trump administration's equally unprecedented charging of WikiLeaks founder Julian

Assange, a journalist and publisher, under the US Espionage Act.

Like the Coalition, Labor has backed the US vendetta against Assange from the outset. In 2010, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard branded Assange a "criminal" for leaking documents exposing US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, and its diplomatic conspiracies around the world.

To this day, Labor continues to support the US operation to extradite Assange, an Australian citizen, and silence him for good. This is intended to send an intimidating message to all journalists, whistleblowers and opponents of the escalating economic and military aggression of Washington and its partners.

The bipartisan cover-up of the operations of the ASD and SAS is also directly related to plans to suppress popular opposition to the drive to war and the accompanying attacks on living conditions and basic democratic rights.

The ASD monitors domestic dissent. Among the documents leaked by Edward Snowden, one showed that in just one day, in 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 (see: "Australian agency integrated into NSA spying operations").

The SAS commandos train to suppress social unrest, in the name of combatting "terrorism" or "domestic violence." The Special Forces would be the first regiments to be mobilised under the expanded military call-out laws pushed through parliament late last year.



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