

Accused Christchurch terrorist in court, trial set for next year

Tom Peters
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Yesterday, accused terrorist Brenton Tarrant appeared in the Christchurch High Court via video-link from Auckland's maximum security Paremoremo prison. He pleaded not guilty to 51 charges of murder, 40 of attempted murder and one of committing a terrorist act, in relation to mass shootings at two Christchurch mosques on March 15.

In his manifesto "The Great Replacement," posted online shortly before the attacks, Tarrant indicated his intention to plead not guilty and use the trial to espouse his racist and fascist views.

More than 100 people crowded into the courtroom, including family members of those killed and survivors of the attacks. There were gasps of disbelief from the public gallery as his lawyers entered the not guilty pleas. The accused remained silent and reportedly smiled during the hearing. His microphone was muted, so he would not have been heard even if he had spoken.

Another preliminary hearing has been set down for August 16, but the trial itself will not begin until May 4, 2020, more than a year after the attacks. Defence lawyer Shane Tate said he expected the trial to last three months. Judge Cameron Mander believed it would take six weeks but accepted it could be longer.

There is widespread anger that the Christchurch atrocity, New Zealand's worst-ever mass shooting, was allowed to occur. Tarrant made numerous violent threats on social media and far-right online forums, over several years. He was reported to Australian police in 2016 for threatening to kill an opponent of the anti-Muslim United Patriots Front. Police in Melbourne dismissed the complaint.

Tarrant was able to travel the world freely and interact with fascist groups in Australia, Austria and France, before settling in New Zealand in 2017 where he obtained a gun license after passing a police

background check. Police dismissed a complaint about racist and violent language by members of the Bruce Rifle Club near Dunedin, where Tarrant practised shooting.

Three months after the massacre, Australian and New Zealand police have not explained why they ignored these warnings.

The government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is doing everything possible to whitewash the role of the state agencies and cover up the political roots of the shootings. The Christchurch attacks took place in the context of perpetual war in the Middle East, and the promotion of racism and xenophobia by the political establishment, including Ardern's Labour Party.

A royal commission, ostensibly investigating whether the Christchurch attacks could have been prevented, began one month ago but is being held in secret. The inquiry's main purpose is to cover up the role of the police, Security Intelligence Service (SIS) and Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) in turning a blind eye to the danger posed by right-wing extremism. The public can have no confidence that it will be told what was known about Tarrant, and when and by which agencies.

The victims' families were not consulted in drafting the royal commission's terms of reference. The Islamic Women's Council and other Muslim organisations were also ignored.

Since the attacks, several Muslims have spoken to the media anonymously about being approached by the SIS and asked to spy on their community. Many have also reported being routinely stopped and treated like criminals while entering and leaving the country. It is possible that some of Tarrant's victims, many of whom were immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries, were themselves the targets of state

surveillance. New Zealand has never experienced any attacks by Islamic terrorists but there have been murders, assaults and threats by neo-Nazis.

The National Party's Chris Finlayson, the minister in charge of the intelligence agencies from 2014-2017, told Radio NZ on June 7 that "the issue of the far-right when I was the minister never came to the forefront" of the agencies' concerns. The current minister responsible, Labour's Andrew Little, stated shortly after the attacks that the SIS only began to seriously look at the far-right in mid-2018 and had not reached the point of identifying any particular groups or individuals when the Christchurch attacks happened.

Defending the agencies, Finlayson said "lone wolf attacks" were "very hard to identify." Radio NZ did not challenge this assertion, even though it is clear that Tarrant was part of an international network of fascists. He corresponded with the racist Austrian Identitarians and was well-known in Australian fascist circles, which are heavily monitored by police and intelligence agencies. The gunman corresponded with the Australian-based United Patriots Front and the Lads Society, which tried to recruit him in 2016.

To maintain the fiction that Tarrant was a "lone wolf" and therefore could not have been stopped, public discussion of his connections with far-right groups and political motivations has largely been suppressed.

New Zealand's Chief Censor banned Tarrant's manifesto, with the threat of 10 years in prison for anyone found in possession of it. Police have charged a handful of people, whose names have mostly been suppressed, with circulating Tarrant's video of the mosque shootings and his manifesto.

The racist and anti-Muslim statements in the manifesto closely resemble the rhetoric of US President Donald Trump—who Tarrant hailed as a "symbol of white renewal"—as well as Australia's One Nation and the New Zealand First Party, which plays a major role in the Labour Party-led coalition government. Labour has largely adopted NZ First's anti-immigrant policies.

The document also makes clear Tarrant's sympathy with the police and military and his hatred of Marxism and socialism, which is shared by the political establishment.

In an unprecedented decision, New Zealand's major media outlets agreed to self-censor their coverage of the trial, after Ardern urged journalists not to focus on

Tarrant and vowed she would never mention his name.

A *New Zealand Herald* editorial yesterday said the newspaper would not "suppress information needlessly" but added that "there will be no gratuitous coverage of the court proceedings, or the accused." It cited the agreement by five media organisations to avoid reporting any statements or "any message, imagery, symbols or signals... made by the accused or his associates promoting or supporting white supremacist ideology," including any references to the manifesto.

Far from being "gratuitous," the gunman's motivations, and their political source, should be a major part of any genuine investigation of the attacks. The censorship of Tarrant's statements and his manifesto has nothing to do with combating fascism or terrorism. The aim is to prevent the working class from understanding the political source of the Christchurch massacre. As workers seek to fight back against years of austerity, the ruling class in every country is responding by whipping up nationalism and promoting extreme right-wing forces, in order to divide the working class along national and ethnic lines, and to justify criminal imperialist wars.



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