

Australian spy and police chiefs say raids on journalists must continue

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Despite public outrage over recent federal police raids on journalists, the Australian government and the country's intelligence and police commanders have declared that such raids and criminal prosecutions are essential.

Submissions to a parliamentary committee by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), three spy agencies and the Home Affairs Department, which oversees these agencies, have insisted that journalists, as well as whistleblowers, must be targeted, to stop leaks exposing official secrets.

In a blunt intervention, Director-General of National Intelligence Nick Warner used the language of war. He warned parliament's joint intelligence and security committee that the publication of leaks could threaten "the nation's warfighters," as well as Australia's "network of international intelligence partnerships."

Making a rare public pronouncement as the country's spy chief, Warner effectively underscored the connection between the global assault on journalism—spearheaded by the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning—and the preparations by the US and its closest allies for war.

While paying lip service to "the important role" of "a free and open press," Warner said this "public interest" was not the only issue. The intelligence agencies had to operate with "high levels of secrecy" to prevent "serious or exceptionally grave damage to Australia's national interest."

The joint Liberal-National and Labor Party committee's inquiry into "the freedom of the press" is an attempt to deflect the widespread opposition to the police raids. One was on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Sydney headquarters, over its reports on Australian military war crimes in Afghanistan. The

other was on the home of a senior News Corp journalist, Annika Smethurst, over her report of plans to legalise internal surveillance by the electronic spy agency, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD).

Warner's remarks further demonstrate why the entire Australian political establishment has supported the arrest of Assange and the application by the Trump administration for his extradition to the US to face multiple charges under the US Espionage Act punishable by 175 years' imprisonment. This has set a global precedent for the jailing of journalists and anyone else who exposes the crimes, abuses, regime-change operations and mass surveillance committed anywhere in the world by the US-led military-intelligence machine and its partners.

First and foremost, Warner declared that intelligence is "vitally important to supporting the Australian Defence Force [ADF]." All the spy agencies had "a long history of supporting military operations" and enabling the "ADF and Coalition partners to conduct highly targeted operations."

While not naming China, Warner painted a picture of Australia under "unprecedented" threat from "foreign interference" and "foreign intelligence activity," in addition to "espionage" and "terrorism." This is under conditions in which Washington is ramping up its pressure on Canberra to boost its commitment to war plans against China and Iran, including the possible deployment of US missile batteries to Australia.

The intelligence chief highlighted the necessity to protect the security apparatus's ties to "a network of international intelligence partnerships." Leaks could endanger the agencies' access to shared secrets. Warner claimed that this web extended well beyond the "Five Eyes" allies—the US, the UK, Canada and New Zealand. In reality, Washington dominates this

coalition.

Immediately after the police raids, the acting AFP commissioner Neil Gaughan blurted out that the real reason for the raids was to protect the information that the Australian police and intelligence agencies receive from their “Five Eyes” counterparts.

Warner’s broadside is particularly significant because of his record. He is a long-time intelligence, military and diplomatic chief, with the closest possible connections to the US military and spy apparatus. Among other things, he headed the Australian military takeover of Solomon Islands in 2003–04 and then led an “inter-agency” taskforce in the US-led occupation of Iraq during 2004–05.

In a coordinated campaign to defend the police raids, submissions were also made to the parliamentary committee by two other spy agencies, the ASD and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), which monitors domestic dissent. The public will be kept in the dark about much of the committee’s discussions behind closed doors. ASIO’s submission, labelled “classified” and “confidential to the committee,” was completely blacked out.

Both the AFP and the Home Affairs Department, speaking on behalf of the Liberal-National government, made submissions that demand that their powers to raid and prosecute journalists remain unhindered. “Press freedom is not absolute,” the Home Affairs document states. Journalists “are subject to the law.”

The law includes the “foreign interference” legislation that Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government, backed by Labor, pushed through parliament last year. It imposes jail terms of up to 10 years for merely “receiving” information deemed prejudicial to “national security”—which is defined to include “political, military or economic relations” with other countries. This legislation can outlaw reporting on everything from the Special Forces killings of civilians in Afghanistan to the inhuman treatment of refugees in Australia’s Pacific island detention camps.

Further evidence of the security apparatus’s role in the police raids came this week from a Freedom of Information (FOI) request by Centre Alliance Senator Rex Patrick. The AFP refused to release some of the requested documents because it said they related to an agency that is exempt from FOI. Agencies that have complete exemption from the FOI Act include ASIO,

the ASD and the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), the overseas spy agency.

The documents that were released confirm that the AFP raids targeted journalists for prosecution, as much as the alleged whistleblowers, one of whom, a former military lawyer, is already on trial. The released documents show that AFP acting commissioner Gaughan was given a list of “media talking-points” to defend the investigation of journalists.

The police raids, like the persecution of Assange and Manning, are part of a broader attack on freedom of speech and other fundamental democratic rights, driven by an agenda of war preparations and suppression of rising political and social discontent. An Australian lawyer is currently also on trial for helping a former ASIS officer expose the Howard Liberal-National government’s illegal bugging of the East Timorese government during oil and gas negotiations in 2004.

Yesterday, the High Court ruled unanimously that a federal public servant was correctly dismissed for posting on social media—even anonymously—comments critical of Australia’s cruel refugee detention regime. This ruling opens the way for similar sackings by corporate employers of workers who oppose any company conduct.



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