

Australian government revives plan for internal electronic surveillance

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton have once again launched a scare campaign about internet paedophile networks to justify plans to formally allow the country's electronic eavesdropping and cyber warfare agency to spy on people inside Australia.

The Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) forms a key part of the global “Five Eyes” surveillance and cyber-attack network led by the US National Security Agency (NSA). The ASD also operates closely with the military within the Defence portfolio. It provides information to support military operations and conducts “offensive” operations to hack into or disrupt facilities in targeted countries such as China and Iran.

Promoting the ASD proposal, Morrison said Australia's crime and intelligence agencies would “get what they need to protect kids” from perverts operating on the “dark web.” This is just the latest invocation of on-line child sexual exploitation, which already is intensively monitored globally, to provide a pretext for the development of police-state surveillance.

Currently, the ASD is legally barred from most domestic spying, but previous secret documents released by WikiLeaks and NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden proved that this is a façade. The material showed that the ASD and its Five Eyes partners intercept the communications of millions of people around the globe, as well as rival governments, and freely exchange data about each others' citizens.

Giving the ASD domestic powers would allow it free rein to target people inside Australia with military-grade snooping and hacking capabilities, including malware that exploits vulnerabilities in applications and operating systems like Windows.

The Liberal-National Coalition government is seeking to remove even the limited legal restrictions on

these operations. At present, the ASD's supply of information to the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the main domestic spy agency, is meant to require ministerial approval.

Acutely aware of widespread opposition to the continual expansions of the powers of the police and intelligence apparatus, Morrison and Dutton have dressed up the proposal as being about cracking down on paedophiles and other “criminal networks.” Dutton raised the imaginary spectre of an encrypted server in Sydney with images of “a five- or six-year-old child being sexually exploited and tortured.”

For years, the government has offered similar scenarios repeatedly to justify unprecedented expansions of surveillance over the population. This includes encryption-cracking powers and metadata-retention laws that compel telecommunications providers to store detailed data about every call or internet search their customers make.

This latest proposal is another sham. The AFP already targets online child abuse through a Virtual Global Taskforce, which cooperates with INTERPOL, EUROPOL and other international enforcement agencies. In addition, the AFP's Cybercrime Investigation teams investigate cyber crimes.

Moreover, the AFP and ASIO have vast resources and powers, including to access computers, emails, bank records and text messages. Both agencies have more than tripled in size since 2001, with successive governments pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into their budgets.

Based on leaked documents, News Corp national political editor Annika Smethurst first reported in 2018 that the government was planning to increase the ASD's domestic powers. The government vehemently

denied the report and then, last June, authorised the AFP to raid her Canberra home, hunting for evidence to prosecute the journalist and her sources.

A day later, the AFP raided the Sydney headquarters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), confiscating 120 files. That was over another revealing exposure, about the protracted official cover-up of war crimes by Australian Special Forces units involved in the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

The precedent for this assault on the media and free speech was set by the April 11, 2019 British police arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. He was dragged out of asylum in Ecuador's London embassy to face extradition to the US on manufactured charges of espionage for exposing war crimes, mass surveillance and other abuses by the US and its allies, including Australia.

The connection to Assange's persecution was highlighted the day after the ABC raid. AFP acting chief Neil Gaughan said the raid's purpose was to protect access to the Five Eyes network. Gaughan's remark pointed to the pressure coming from the Trump administration to ensure that the public is kept in the dark about the increasingly aggressive activities of the US spy and military forces against China and other US rivals.

Last month, a Federal Court judge bluntly dismissed an ABC legal challenge to the raid, declaring that the interests of "national security" overrode those of the public's right to information. Last week, the ABC announced that it would not appeal the ruling, thus giving the government a further green light to prosecute journalists and whistleblowers.

To head off the continuing outcry among journalists and the public, the government and the AFP released a proposal to allow police to issue journalists and media outlets with "Notices to Produce" documents and the names of confidential sources, supposedly to avoid the need for police raids.

Journalists, press freedom advocates and even the corporate media chiefs denounced the scheme as "window dressing." It adds new police powers, while leaving in place the threat of raids being mounted if requested materials are not handed over.

In addition, the government is proceeding with two trials, mostly to be conducted behind closed-doors, over leaks that exposed the criminality of the intelligence

apparatus. In one, former military lawyer David McBride is accused of giving the ABC the "Afghan Files" on the Special Forces cover-up. In the other, a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) officer, known only as Witness K, and his lawyer Bernard Collaery could be jailed for up to two years for exposing ASIS's illegal bugging of East Timor's cabinet office during oil and gas negotiations.

Despite the public outcry over the police raids and trials, the Labor Party, which has a long record of commitment to the US military alliance, has backed bolstering the state apparatus. For years, Labor has joined hands with the Coalition to pass more than 75 pieces of legislation handing unprecedented powers to the police and intelligence agencies. This has included barrages of "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.

Like the Coalition, Labor has backed the US vendetta against Assange from the outset. In 2010, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard denounced Assange for publishing documents exposing US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, and its diplomatic conspiracies around the world. To this day, led by Anthony Albanese, Labor continues to support the US operation to extradite Assange, an Australian citizen, and condemn him to prison for life.

Throughout the ongoing "war on terrorism" launched by Washington in 2001, Australian governments, both Coalition and Labor, have erected a repressive framework. These measures will be used to suppress dissent as opposition rises to the political and corporate elite over social inequality, environmental and health disasters, war preparations and the accompanying assault on basic legal and democratic rights.



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