

Australian establishment treats sentencing of Christchurch terrorist as a non-event

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3 September 2020

The Australian political and media establishment treated last week's sentencing of Brenton Tarrant, the fascist gunman who killed 51 people in two Christchurch, New Zealand mosques in March, 2019, as a non-event, with no significance for domestic politics.

From the press coverage, and the statements of senior politicians, the uninformed observer would have no idea that the Australian-born Tarrant is the country's most prolific terrorist, or that his extreme-right views and activities had any connection to the many years he spent in Australia.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, along with representatives of the Labor opposition, stated again that Tarrant was a "monster," and expressed "relief" that he would never be released from prison. They made mealy-mouthed statements of sympathy for the victims, but said nothing of Tarrant's political perspective, other than to describe it as "hateful." The federal government is considering calls from New Zealand that Tarrant be transported to Australia to serve out his sentence.

The Australian media coverage was no less muted. It consisted largely of syndicated articles from foreign news agencies, and the most limited factual reports. This was not the occasion for the type of "national soul searching" so often concocted by the corporate press and usually over secondary issues. Any examination of the roots of the terrorist attack, or the social, economic and political processes in Australia that contributed to it, was off the table.

The WSWS has extensively refuted the depiction by New Zealand's Labour Party-led government and that country's political establishment of Tarrant as an unhinged Australian who intruded into an otherwise peaceable and tolerant society.

This is aimed at covering up the fact that Tarrant's xenophobic views parallel the anti-immigrant rhetoric of Labour, and its coalition partner New Zealand First, as well as the existence of longstanding fascist networks within the country.

It is nevertheless the case that Tarrant, who was 28-years-old at the time of the Christchurch attack, spent his formative years in Australia, travelled the world on an Australian passport, as he made contact with fascist forces internationally, and was involved with extreme-right Australian organisations in the years immediately preceding his rampage.

The bare details of his biography demonstrate the unquestionable impact of the Australian ruling elite's dramatic lurch to right over the past three decades on Tarrant's development.

The future terrorist was born in the New South Wales country town of Grafton in 1990, roughly the midpoint of two federal Labor governments that were in office from 1983–1996.

Headed by prime ministers Bob Hawke and then Paul Keating, the

Labor governments carried out in Australia the social counter-revolution associated with Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. The economy was deregulated, hundreds of thousands of jobs were destroyed and working conditions torn up.

The previous program of the trade unions—to defend capitalism by pushing for limited, nationally-based social reform—had been rendered unviable by globalisation. They became the enforcers of the corporate offensive, a role that has only deepened over the decades since.

The assault on the working class created a social crisis across the country, including in regional centres such as Grafton.

There is no evidence from the opaque details of Tarrant's publicly-available biography indicating that he came from a background of substantial social hardship. He appears to have hailed from a lower-middle class family, and came into a substantial sum of money at some point in his 20s. This was reportedly the result of his father's early death in 2010, as well as cryptocurrency investments.

The social devastation, however, combined with the transformation of Labor and the unions into openly corporatist entities, and their smashing up of the organised workers' movement that had previously existed, created a toxic political atmosphere. It presented right-wing populist forces with an opportunity to posture as defenders of ordinary people and to capitalise on the mounting social misery.

The assault on the working class went hand in hand with a program of militarism and the persecution of refugees. Australia, under the Labor government, was among the first countries to join the illegal US attack on Iraq in 1991. Shortly thereafter, it introduced mandatory detention for asylum-seekers.

Labor and the unions, reprising their founding "White Australia" program, scapegoated migrants for the mounting unemployment and poverty that they enforced. They fraudulently asserted that the "defence of jobs" was a struggle against "foreign workers," not the corporations and the ruling elite.

In 1997, Pauline Hanson formed the One Nation Party. Hanson had stood as a Liberal candidate in the 1996 federal election, but was disendorsed during the campaign after making racist comments. She was elected as an independent.

Based on anti-immigrant and anti-Asian demagoguery, One Nation sought to capitalise on widespread disaffection with the political establishment. Its claims that Asian migration threatened to overwhelm "Australians" anticipated the racist theories of a "great replacement" of "Anglo-Saxons" later adopted by Tarrant, and paralleled the chauvinism of the unions.

The early 2000s, when Tarrant would have become aware of political developments, were dominated by Australia's participation in the illegal US wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. The

accompanying “anti-terror” campaign, endorsed by the entire political establishment, involved the passage of dozens of repressive laws and the continuous vilification of Muslims.

On December 11, 2005, extreme-right forces staged a race riot, targeting people of Lebanese origin, in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla. The event, which involved openly fascist political organisations and a crowd of several thousand alcohol-fuelled youth, was incited by the state Labor government, the federal conservative government and powerful sections of the media. Tarrant would have been about 15-years-old at the time. The riot had a formative impact on right-wingers of his generation (see: “The class issues behind Australia’s race riots”)

Over the ensuing years, brutal government attacks on refugees were escalated, with Australia becoming a model for repressive measures targeting asylum-seekers.

Tarrant’s emergence as a violent fascist activist coincided with, and appears to have flowed out of, the official promotion of extreme-right movements beginning in 2015.

In 2011, the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard had aligned Australia with the US “pivot to Asia,” a vast American military build-up in preparation for war with China. This would be accompanied by the development of a xenophobic anti-Chinese campaign, targeting supposed “foreign interference,” and the militarist celebration of the centenary of World War I, which began under a conservative government in 2014 but had been planned and launched by Gillard’s Labor administration.

It was in this context that in 2015, an organisation named “Reclaim Australia” began holding public protests against immigration and Muslims. Indicating the broad hostility to its xenophobic positions, most of the rallies were attended by fewer than 200 people. They received an inordinate amount of media coverage, however, much of it insinuating that the handful of racists was giving expression to legitimate broader public concerns.

A plethora of extreme-right groups would emerge from Reclaim Australia, including the United Patriots Front (UPF), the Lads Society and Antipodean Resistance, which claimed to model itself on the Nazi youth movement.

After Tarrant’s attack, it emerged that he was well-known to the leaders of the UPF and its successor organisation, the Lads Society. In 2016, Tarrant had publicly posted on Facebook: “Globalists and Marxists on suicide watch, patriots and nationalists triumphant—looking forward to Emperor Blair Cottrell coming soon.”

Cottrell, the then leader of the UPF, had an extensive criminal record and had previously expressed his admiration for Adolf Hitler. Because of his involvement with Reclaim Australia, however, he was given substantial press coverage, including by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and his more unsavoury comments were airbrushed.

After the Christchurch attack, another leader of the UPF, which had by that stage been wound-up, revealed that he unsuccessfully sought to recruit Tarrant to the Lads Society. Thomas Sewell told his followers that Tarrant “had been on the scene for quite a while.”

Two months after the Christchurch attack, Sewell responded to media inquiries about his connections with Tarrant by stating he did not “condone violence at this stage,” but that “if you make the peaceful alternative impossible, you leave only the other option.”

The extent to which the Reclaim Australia milieu was nurtured by the highest levels of government is indicated by several developments.

In October 2018, five months before the Christchurch attack, the

Liberal-National government endorsed a motion declaring that it is “OK to be white,” one of the slogans of the alt-right. Its ministers later claimed the vote had been the result of an “administrative error.”

The same month, it was revealed that the New South Wales branch of the Young Nationals had been successfully “infiltrated” by extreme-right elements, including members of the Lads Society and Antipodean Resistance. They had secured state executive positions, to which they were nominated by senior members of the party, and were only expelled after being exposed by anti-fascist researchers (see: “Fascist group exposed in youth wing of Australia’s National Party”).

Cottrell and Sewell would also closely collaborate with Senator Fraser Anning, who was installed in federal parliament by Pauline Hansen’s One Nation Party in 2017 as the result of a vacancy. Anning would alternatively sit as a representative of another right-wing populist outfit, Katter’s Australia Party, and then as an independent.

In his maiden parliamentary speech in August, 2018, Anning called for a “final solution” to the “immigration problem,” in language borrowed from the Nazis’ description of their extermination of European Jewry. Still a parliamentarian, Anning responded to Tarrant’s attack by declaring that it was the result of “Muslim fanatics” being allowed to migrate to the west.

The connections between the small fascist milieu and sections of the political establishment have continued. Last month, it was revealed that a candidate in the 2019 federal election for Pauline Hanson’s One Nation later applied for membership in “The Base,” an international fascist organisation connected to terror plots.

The bringing forward of extreme-right forces is an international phenomenon, exemplified by US President Donald Trump’s attempts to cultivate an American fascist movement. It is the response of the ruling elite to the emergence of mass working-class struggles and mounting social and political opposition.

The context in which Tarrant emerged further underscores the fact that the danger of fascism stems from its promotion by the political and media establishments, rather than any mass shift to the right from below. The role of Labor and the unions in creating the social crisis upon which the extreme-right prey demonstrates that fascism can only be fought through the mobilisation of the working class against social inequality, the capitalist system and all of its defenders.

A final point about Tarrant’s connection to Australia should be made. It is inconceivable that he was not well known to the Australian intelligence agencies.

In the years prior to his attack, Tarrant travelled the world, after claiming to have made money through cryptocurrency investments. The fascist journeyed throughout Europe, especially the east of the continent, where he appears to have made contact with right-wing movements.

He would also make trips to Pakistan and North Korea—unlikely holiday destinations for a white supremacist. The intelligence agencies undoubtedly recognised what any informed observer would surmise. Namely that Tarrant’s travels were not those of a restless individual, but were connected to political activities that would have required substantial contacts, funds and organisational support.



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