

New Zealand inquiry suppresses evidence about fascist terror attack

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On November 26, the royal commission of inquiry into the March 15, 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack delivered its final report to the New Zealand government. Fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant carried out mass shootings at two Christchurch mosques, killing 51 people, including children, and injuring 49 more. He was arrested while driving towards a third mosque. The horrific massacres were filmed and live-streamed online by Tarrant himself.

The deadline for the report to be completed has been repeatedly pushed back, which prevented any discussion of its contents prior to the October 17 election. The Labour Party-led government is expected to make the 792-page report public next week, although it has the power to delay publication and to suppress any parts of the document.

The commission's web site says it investigated "what state agencies knew about" Tarrant prior to his attack and whether he could have been stopped. Its findings will inevitably be a whitewash, aimed at protecting the police and intelligence agencies, which turned a blind eye to the clear danger of fascist violence in both Australia and New Zealand, and ignored specific warnings about Tarrant.

The commission will also cover up the responsibility of successive Australian and New Zealand governments, along with the corporate media, for stoking Islamophobia to justify participation in the criminal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ever since the attack, the political establishment and media have suppressed discussion about the political roots of the atrocity. New Zealand's chief censor banned possession of Tarrant's manifesto, which expressed admiration for US President Donald Trump and contained racist, anti-immigrant and anti-socialist statements which resemble those made by capitalist

governments and parties throughout the world.

In New Zealand, the right-wing populist NZ First, which played a major role in the 2017–2020 Labour-led coalition government, has repeatedly denounced Muslims as potential terrorists and opposed immigrants from Asia, using language similar to Tarrant's.

Following a request from Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's major media organisations agreed not to report on Tarrant's statements about his fascist motivations during his trial. In the event, Tarrant pleaded guilty, meaning that he did not face trial and has never been questioned publicly.

Even if the government releases the royal commission's report without redactions, the document cannot be checked against the evidence submitted to the inquiry, which is being kept secret. This includes more than 400 interview transcripts and more than 1,000 public submissions. Only a few submissions, including by Muslim community groups, have been publicly released.

The commissioners, Supreme Court Judge William Young and former diplomat Jacqui Caine, announced that, for reasons of "national security," submissions by government ministers and senior public servants will be suppressed for 30 years.

This includes testimony given by the police, who granted Tarrant a firearms license despite the fact that he did not have appropriate referees. Police also dismissed a warning from a member of the public about racist and violent language overheard by members of the Bruce Rifle Club, where Tarrant trained for his deadly attack. Tarrant had also been reported to Australian police in 2016 for threatening to kill an anti-fascist protester; police dismissed the complaint.

The intelligence agencies, supposedly subjects of the inquiry, helped to write its report. The commissioners

said they received a “substantial amount” of “Restricted, Confidential, Secret, and Top Secret” material. The commission “undertook a process, with the assistance of intelligence and security agencies, to ensure it could include relevant material in the report without damaging New Zealand’s national security interests.”

An interview conducted with Tarrant during the inquiry will be permanently kept secret. The commissioners say this decision was taken so as “not to provide a platform for the dissemination of the individual’s views.” The real aim, as with the censorship of Tarrant’s manifesto, is to prevent public discussion about his fascist views and to suppress information concerning his activities and connections in Australia, New Zealand and internationally.

Muslim community organisations have criticised the extraordinary secrecy. Foundation Against Islamophobia and Racism spokesperson Azad Khan told TVNZ: “We don’t know what information is being suppressed, to whose benefit it is being suppressed. We definitely know it is not going to be to the benefit of the Muslim community,” he said.

Khan said the commission’s statement that evidence had to be suppressed because it could be used as a how-to “manual” by other terrorists was “the lamest excuse I’ve heard.” He noted that anyone “intent on causing maximum carnage” could find “heaps of material online.”

The Islamic Women’s Council released its submission to the royal commission, which stated that police, the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) and other state agencies had ignored multiple warnings of escalating fascist violence and threats against Muslims.

The Council has criticised the royal commission’s secrecy and expressed concern that no one within the state apparatus will be held accountable for the failure to prevent the attack. Spokesperson Anjum Rahman told Radio NZ, “We weren’t able to be present when agencies were being questioned, nor able to see their evidence and respond to it.”

Nearly two years after the Christchurch terrorist attack, almost nothing has been made public about how it was prepared and who else knew about Tarrant’s activities. The media has continually presented him as a reclusive “self-radicalised” terrorist, despite his known contacts with fascist groups in Australia such as the

Lads Society, which tried to recruit him.

In New Zealand, the far-right Action Zealandia (previously called the Dominion Movement) expounds the same white supremacist views as Tarrant. One of its founding members, a soldier in the army, was charged with espionage last month for allegedly releasing classified information to an unnamed organisation. The soldier’s name and other details have not been made public, including whether he had any contact with Tarrant, whose manifesto mentioned that there were large numbers of fascists in the armed forces internationally.

Arden’s main response to the March 15 attack has been to strengthen the powers and resources of the state censor to suppress online content that authorities deem “extremist.” Arden has been at the forefront of a global push for internet censorship. Her government has also poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the SIS, the Government Communications Security Bureau, and the police, to significantly boost their recruitment.

The target of these measures is not the extreme right. The state apparatus is being strengthened in preparation to confront a resurgence of working-class struggles against austerity, unemployment and poverty. Meanwhile, the far-right is being emboldened by the Labour government’s promotion of militarism and its draconian anti-immigrant policies, designed to scapegoat foreigners for the economic and social crisis triggered by the pandemic.



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