

Royal commission into New Zealand terror attack whitewashes government agencies

Tom Peters

9 December 2020

On Tuesday, New Zealand's Labour Party government released a 792-page report from the royal commission of inquiry into the March 15, 2019 Christchurch terror attack. Fifty-one people, including young children, were killed and dozens injured in mass shootings at two mosques by fascist terrorist Brenton Tarrant.

The inquiry was ostensibly set up to investigate what public sector agencies, including the police and spy agencies, knew about Tarrant's activities prior to the attack, and whether it could have been prevented.

The report, however, whitewashes the role played by the state in creating the environment which led to New Zealand's worst mass shooting and one of the most appalling acts of terrorism internationally.

It does not condemn successive Australian and New Zealand governments for participating in the criminal US imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To justify these wars, politicians, government ministers and the media in both countries demonised Muslims, fuelling the growth of the far-right.

Commissioners Sir William Young and Jacqui Caine found that in the lead-up to the attack "there was an inappropriate concentration of counter-terrorism resources on the threat of Islamist extremist terrorism," with hardly any attention paid to right-wing extremism. But they declared that this concentration was "not why [Tarrant's] planning and preparation for his terrorist attack was not detected."

They reach the extraordinary conclusion that "there was no plausible way he could have been detected except by chance." Despite his known links to Australian and European fascist groups, the report concluded that Tarrant "acted alone."

Although Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the heads of the police and intelligence agencies issued token apologies for the few failings identified in the report, no individuals have been held accountable. Ardern declared there were "lessons to be learned" but said "the commission found no failures within any government agencies" that contributed to the attack. Opposition National Party leader Judith Collins told the media he was a "lone wolf" and no one else was responsible for the attack.

The government has accepted the report's 44 recommendations, including the establishment of a new Ministry for Ethnic Communities, various measures to promote "diversity" in the public services and enhanced "hate speech" legislation. These measures will not stop the growth of extreme right-wing and racist groups, which have been emboldened by the government's efforts

to scapegoat migrants for unemployment and other aspects of the social crisis.

Most significantly, the report recommends "enhanced capacity and capability and a less restrictive legislative framework" for the intelligence agencies. This means strengthening the ability of the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) and the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) to spy on the population. The commissioners also call for the government to create a third intelligence agency to provide "strategic policy advice [and] develop a counter-terrorism strategy" for the GCSB, SIS and police.

The commissioners declare: "The idea that intelligence and security agencies engage in mass surveillance of New Zealanders is a myth." They claim the agencies were "in a fragile state" prior to 2016 and a "rebuilding exercise" had not been completed in 2019.

In fact, as a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, the GCSB engages in mass surveillance of electronic communications within New Zealand and internationally, as has been thoroughly exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden. It also shares information and resources with counterparts in the US, Australia, Britain and Canada.

The contention that these agencies could not have known about Tarrant, who travelled extensively and donated to fascist groups in France and Austria, as well as having connections in Australia, is not credible.

The commission's report is a thoroughly sanitized document, written in close collaboration with the SIS and the GCSB. These agencies were able to veto the inclusion of information on "national security" grounds.

The report cannot be checked against the evidence presented to the royal commission. All its hearings were held in secret and the commissioners permanently suppressed the vast majority of the evidence, including a transcript of an interview with Tarrant, and more than 1,000 other submissions. Testimony from government ministers and agency heads will be suppressed for 30 years.

The commission's only criticism of NZ police is that they "failed to meet required standards in the administration of the firearms licensing system," allowing Tarrant to obtain a license and purchase 10 guns, including military-style weapons. Tarrant's only referees for his application were a person described as a "gaming friend" and the friend's father, whose identities are concealed.

Part 6, Chapter 5 of the report dismisses a claim made by Peter Breidahl, a former NZ soldier, that he went to police in November 2017 to report disturbing, violent and anti-Muslim language used by members of the Bruce Rifle Club near Dunedin, where Tarrant trained for his attack. The commissioners imply that Breidahl is a liar and accept the statements by police that he “did not complain” to them.

The report mentions that in August 2016 Tarrant sent a death threat to a critic of the Australian fascist United Patriots Front (UPF) on Facebook. It notes: “This threat was allegedly reported to Australian police but no action was taken.” Australian police denied receiving the report and the matter was apparently not investigated by the NZ royal commission.

Tarrant’s close connections with Australian fascist groups undermine the claim that he was a “lone actor.” The royal commission described him as an “active member” in social media groups linked with the UPF and its offshoot, the Lads Society, which tried to recruit him. He made numerous Facebook comments praising these groups and threatening violence against Muslims and socialists. It is inconceivable that none of this came to the attention of Australian police or intelligence agencies, which closely monitor the far-right.

Several people who gave evidence to the commission have strongly criticised its findings and the suppression of evidence. Aliya Danzeisen, from the Islamic Women’s Council of New Zealand (IWCNZ), compared the report to George Orwell’s novel *1984*. She wrote on the *Newsroom* web site: “a lot of highly relevant information has been ignored or not even considered.” The IWCNZ and other groups were not allowed “to be in the room” when state agencies gave their testimony, and were unable to challenge it. “The Commission just went with the easiest testimony and conclusion,” Danzeisen said.

In February 2019, Danzeisen reported to police a threat she received on social media saying a Hamilton mosque would be attacked on March 15. The threat came from a Facebook account that appeared to be in Christchurch. She told Radio NZ the police response to this threat was not addressed in the commission’s report.

Nor is there any explanation for the remarkable coincidence that police were engaged in a counter-terrorism training exercise in Christchurch on the same day that Tarrant carried out his attack. The IWCNZ asked the commission to investigate why this event was scheduled for March 15, 2019, but this request was ignored.

Imam Gamal Fouda, from the Al Noor mosque that was targeted in the attack, told a press conference he had “reported suspicious people around the... mosque but was disappointed by the lack of action taken by police.” The mosque was repeatedly threatened by neo-Nazis.

Muslim Association of Canterbury spokesperson Abdigani Ali said it was “alarming” that agencies had focused “almost exclusively [on] the threat of Islamist extremism.”

Speaking to Radio NZ, Wasseim Alsati, who was shot along with his four-year-old daughter, questioned why the commission’s report was released just before the holiday period and the closure of parliament.

The release, which was delayed until after the October election,

was undoubtedly timed to minimise public discussion and scrutiny. This has been the aim of the political and media establishment ever since the attack.

The Chief Censor banned possession of Tarrant’s fascist manifesto, which revealed the similarity of his anti-immigrant, racist and anti-Marxist views to those of the Trump administration in the US, the New Zealand First Party, then in a coalition government with Ardern and Labour, and similar far-right parties around the world.

Media organisations agreed to Ardern’s demand to minimise references to Tarrant and his views, including in any trial. Tarrant unexpectedly pled guilty to terrorism and murder charges earlier this year, meaning he has never been publicly questioned in court.

The manifesto also mentioned that fascists are frequently members of the armed forces. The royal commission report contains no mention of the fascist group Action Zealandia (AZ), which shares Tarrant’s views and had members within the army, including one soldier who is charged with leaking classified information.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will examine the report in greater detail in coming weeks. It is abundantly clear, however, that it is a cover-up of the role of the state in relation to the March 15 attack. It exploits the atrocity to call for boosting the anti-democratic powers of the very agencies that, at the very least, turned a blind eye to the clear danger of fascist violence.

These powers will not be used to protect the population against fascists. It is not accidental that Ardern partnered with the French government of Emanuel Macron on the so-called Christchurch Call to Action, the Labour Party government’s main response to the Christchurch attack. This initiative aims to develop mechanisms to censor “extremism” online. What is defined as extremism is determined by government agencies.

Macron’s government is currently overseeing a fascistic crackdown on Muslims, including the closure of dozens of mosques and charities, aimed at whipping up racism and diverting attention from the social crisis, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The French state is promoting the same anti-Muslim filth peddled by fascist groups which Tarrant supported.

In response to the greatest breakdown of global capitalism since the Great Depression, the capitalist class in every country is strengthening the police, military and intelligence agencies, while protecting and encouraging the far-right. They are preparing to suppress working class opposition to unprecedented levels of social inequality, the disastrous response to the pandemic, and accelerating plans for war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact