

Why was the 2019 New Zealand terror attack not prevented?

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The 800-page report released in early December by New Zealand's Royal Commission of Inquiry into the March 15, 2019 Christchurch terror attack fails to explain why authorities did not prevent the massacre of 51 people by fascist Brenton Tarrant.

The purpose of the inquiry was not to reveal the truth of what happened, but to whitewash the role of state agencies and politicians in encouraging the extreme right and creating the conditions for such attacks. Successive New Zealand and Australian governments have participated in illegal US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, accompanied by the demonisation of Muslims, and scapegoated immigrants for worsening social inequality and poverty.

The report's main recommendations, accepted by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, are for stricter procedures for firearms license applications and tougher hate speech laws, as well as far greater resources for the intelligence agencies.

The main finding is that, apart from an email Tarrant sent to the NZ parliament and media organisations nine minutes before his attack, containing his manifesto, "there was no other information... available to any relevant Public sector agency that could or should have alerted them to the terrorist attack."

The commission found that Tarrant's preparations, including more than a year of firearms training in New Zealand and contact with extreme right-wing groups internationally, could only have been detected by "chance." There was nothing the police, Security Intelligence Service (SIS) or the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) could have done to stop him.

These conclusions are not substantiated. Almost all the evidence examined by the inquiry is being kept secret, including an interview with Tarrant, over 15,000 pages from NZ Police and a total of more than 73,500 pages of evidence and submissions.

The official pretext for the cloak of secrecy is to "protect public safety and the security and defence interests of New Zealand." It also "extend[s] to information supplied in confidence from international partners," including the

Australian police and intelligence agencies.

There were no public hearings where victims' families, their representatives and others could have challenged the assertions made by the state. The commissioners wrote their final report in collaboration with the intelligence agencies, which were ostensibly the subjects of the inquiry.

The result is a sanitised document, full of glaring omissions and contradictions, that raises far more questions than it answers.

The commissioners repeatedly assert that Tarrant was a "lone actor." Yet they are forced to note that he communicated with Australian fascist groups including the United Patriots Front (UPF) and its offshoot the Lads Society. A leading member of the Lads Society told the media that they tried to recruit Tarrant, but he declined to join.

The report quotes some of Tarrant's online threats against socialists and immigrants, which were reported in the media following the terror attack. In 2016 a Facebook user in Australia went to police to report a death threat from Tarrant. The NZ commissioners do not probe this episode; they simply repeat the claims by Australian police that they never received such a report.

Despite Tarrant being an Australian citizen and having extensive contacts there, the NZ royal commission's terms of reference excluded any investigation of the role of Australian agencies in the lead-up to the Christchurch attack.

The inquiry's report dismisses Tarrant's extraordinary record of international travel as irrelevant to the preparation for his attack. Using more than \$400,000 he inherited from his father, Tarrant visited dozens of countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America between 2014 and 2018.

Incredibly, the report declares: "The purpose of the travel was not to meet up with extreme right-wing people or groups or engage in training activities, or reconnaissance of possible targets. Put simply, he travelled widely because he could and had nothing better to do."

Firstly, it is inconceivable that Tarrant's travel did not draw the attention of authorities. Intelligence agencies in

New Zealand routinely gather information about individuals entering and leaving the country. He visited North Korea, China, Russia, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, Turkey and Ukraine, all countries that are under heavy surveillance by the US and its partners in the Five Eyes network, including Australia and New Zealand.

Secondly, the claim that “there is no evidence” Tarrant met fellow right-wing extremists either in Australia, New Zealand or internationally is undermined by other information in the report.

Tarrant visited Ukraine in 2015, one year after the US-backed coup, spearheaded by fascist groups, which sparked an ongoing civil war with pro-Russia separatists. While the inquiry’s report gives scant information about this visit, it clearly made a strong impression on Tarrant, who spoke with his mother and his sister about wanting to live in Ukraine.

In January 2018 Tarrant donated more than \$2,300 to Martin Sellner, the leader of Austria’s white supremacist Identitarian Movement. This was followed by an exchange of emails in which Sellner suggested the pair should meet for a drink. Tarrant replied: “if you ever visit Australia or New Zealand, we have people in both countries that would happily have you stay in their homes if you ever visit,” and mentioned UPF leader Blair Cottrell and the Lads Society’s Thomas Sewell.

Tarrant visited Austria for eight days in November-December 2018, but told the commission he did not meet Sellner. The commissioners state that they are “inclined to accept this denial,” because Tarrant would not have wanted to “do anything that might attract the attention of international intelligence and security agencies.” This merely begs the question of why he donated such a large sum to Sellner and corresponded with him.

Tarrant’s manifesto stated that he had received a “blessing” for his attack from Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, who claimed an association with the extreme right-wing Knights Templar International (KTI). The royal commission notes that Tarrant visited Poland in December 2018 and travelled to a village near the city of Wrocław on the same day that the KTI was holding a “knighting ceremony” there. Following the Christchurch attack, Tarrant’s mother told Australian police that he had attended a right-wing rally in Poland.

In part 4, chapter 6 of the report, the commissioners dismiss this visit as “an elaborate trolling exercise,” i.e., a ruse, by Tarrant. They cite claims by Australian and Polish spy agencies, and later by Tarrant himself, that he never attended the KTI meeting. Contradicting their earlier statement that Tarrant didn’t want to “attract attention,” the commissioners make the extraordinary claim that “he went

out of his way to create a trail of evidence in Poland... to add apparent credibility to his otherwise not very plausible narrative that he had received international support for his planned attack.”

Readers are supposed to believe that Tarrant spent thousands of dollars and considerable effort to travel to the location of an extreme right-wing meeting in Poland, only to *not* attend and instead establish a “red herring” for investigators.

If anything, Tarrant showed a notable lack of concern about attracting attention. He visited heavily-surveilled countries, purchased multiple firearms, made racist and violent threats on social media, and donated to numerous far-right groups. These included the UPF, Sellner’s group, Generation Identity in France, the Identity Movement in Germany, Canada’s Rebel News Network, Freedomain Radio (run by Canadian Stefan Molyneux), the US white supremacist National Policy Institute and the neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer*. Some donations were apparently made using bitcoin and others via an Australian bank account.

If none of this triggered any scrutiny, it is not because New Zealand’s intelligence agencies lack resources, as claimed by the royal commission and the Labour Party-Greens coalition government. Under Helen Clark’s Labour Party government, the number of staff working for the GCSB and SIS doubled between 2001 and 2009 and the agencies’ funding tripled. There have been further increases nearly every year since then.

The real reason Tarrant operated “below the radar” is that the far-right organisations he was involved with are protected by the political establishment and state agencies. As the global economic crisis, accelerated by the pandemic, drives millions of people into struggle against inequality, governments are responding by boosting the repressive apparatus of the state while encouraging nationalism and xenophobia to divide the working class.



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