

New Zealand inquiry covers up police dismissal of anti-Muslim threats prior to 2019 terror attack

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The report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Christchurch terror attack, made public last month, asserts that there was no way any state agency could have detected fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant and prevented his massacre of 51 people on March 15, 2019.

This finding is not supported by evidence. All the inquiry's hearings were held in secret. Thousands of pages of submissions, and hundreds of interviews, have been permanently suppressed.

The commission's predetermined purpose was to whitewash the New Zealand and Australian intelligence agencies and police, and to cover up the role of governments in both countries in whipping up racism and Islamophobia, including through participation in US imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The final report was vetted and approved by the intelligence agencies themselves prior to being released.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed to glaring omissions, unfounded assertions and contradictory claims in the commission's report. The document repeatedly insists that Tarrant acted alone, despite his extensive travel and known connections with Australian and European extreme right-wing groups.

The inquiry's basic modus operandi was to accept all the claims made by police and other state agencies. For instance, in response to reports that Australian police ignored a death threat sent by Tarrant to an individual on Facebook in 2016, the NZ commissioners simply echo police claims that they never received such a complaint.

The report notes that Tarrant, using the name "Harry Barry Tarry," was active on the Australian fascist Lads Society Season Two Facebook group in 2017–2018. The Lads Society had tried to recruit Tarrant and knew about his violent inclinations. Tarrant's posts in the group clearly identified his location as being in Dunedin, New Zealand: he made violent threats against an official from the Otago Muslim Association, a Muslim academic at Otago University, and a local Islamic school.

It beggars belief that the well-known Lads Society's social media group was not monitored by Australian intelligence agencies and police. Yet the NZ royal commission accepted without question the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's (ASIO) statement that it had "no information" on Tarrant, including his Facebook pseudonym.

This is undermined by a section of the report, which notes that

an employee in the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) recalled following the Christchurch attack that they had viewed right-wing social media posts by "Harry Barry Tarry" in 2018, while on secondment to the Combined Threat Assessment Group (CTAG). The CTAG includes the Government Communications Security Bureau, which receives information from the US-led Five Eyes intelligence sharing network, including ASIO.

The royal commission states that "the employee recalled discussing the posts with a colleague (or colleagues) at the time" but did not believe the posts warranted further investigation. Citing ASIO's statement, the commissioners write that "the employee's memory may be awry," i.e., they never saw Tarrant's social media posts.

Warnings made to NZ police prior to the attack are also dismissed.

Twelve pages are devoted to allegations made by former soldier Peter Breidahl that Dunedin police failed to act on his warning in late 2017 about violent and anti-Muslim language used by members of the Bruce Rifle Club (BRC), where Tarrant trained for his attack.

Following the terror attack, Breidahl stated publicly that the officer he spoke with had told him the club members were "nothing to worry about." Breidahl wrote on Facebook that the BRC was "the perfect breeding ground" for someone to train for a mass shooting.

The commissioners interviewed Breidahl. Their report states that when he visited the BRC on November 19, 2017, Breidahl overheard an individual "talking about combat and the 1996 Port Arthur mass shooting in Tasmania, Australia while holding the same kind of weapon used in that attack." He believed this was Tarrant.

In Facebook posts made in late 2017, Breidahl referred to disturbing comments by club members, including one statement that the army would have to be deployed in New Zealand streets to prevent terror attacks by Muslims.

Breidahl's testimony about the toxic culture at BRC—which closed down shortly after the Christchurch attack—undermines claims that Tarrant was an isolated individual, and suggests that he had connections with a far-right, racist subculture in New Zealand.

The commissioners cast doubt on whether Tarrant was present

when Breidahl visited the BRC, saying police only granted Tarrant a firearms licence three days earlier and it usually takes weeks to be sent to the licence holder.

However, the report also notes that in his firearms application in September 2017, Tarrant told police he had already “met with people in a rifle and pistol clubs [sic].” Police rubber-stamped Tarrant’s application for a firearms licence despite the fact that his only referees were an “online gaming friend” and the friend’s father.

Whether or not Breidahl saw Tarrant at the BRC is not the most important issue. Had police investigated the gun club and its members, the fascist gunman may well have been uncovered. Breidahl’s complaint to police undermines the royal commission’s central claim that Tarrant’s preparations for his attack could not have been detected except by chance.

The commissioners therefore conclude that Breidahl “did not complain to police” in 2017 about the culture of the BRC, i.e. that he lied about this following the attack. They mention that police had previously spoken with Breidahl over allegations that he was not properly storing his firearms, and considered revoking his licence—suggesting that Breidahl held a grudge against police and wanted to smear them.

The report says the Dunedin North Police Station district arms officer claimed Breidahl did not speak with him about the BRC and the commissioners declare it is “unlikely” the officer would have “forgotten” about it. The other possibility, that police could be lying to cover up their own negligence, is rejected out of hand.

The royal commission dealt even more dismissively with another warning received by police shortly before the Christchurch attack. On February 20, 2019 police “received a complaint about a person who had made a threat on Facebook to burn a Qur’an at a masjid [mosque] in Hamilton on 15 March 2019,” i.e. the same date as the terror attack.

The commissioners state that police officers visited “the person who made the threat and [gave] them verbal and written warnings,” the person had “no connection” with Tarrant, and the fact that they mentioned March 15 was “a coincidence.” No other details are given to substantiate these assertions, which again simply echo the police version of events.

The Islamic Women’s Council (IWCNZ) strongly criticised police inaction. Its 130-page submission to the royal commission pointed out that when IWCNZ spokesperson Aliya Danzeisen initially complained about the Facebook threat, “the police dismissed the matter,” saying, “the writer was known to them and had mental health problems.”

The submission continues: “The message was showing Christchurch as the sender’s location. Ms Danzeisen had to insist that the matter be recorded and sought assurances that it was the Hamilton mosque that was the mosque at issue and that the sender was actually located in Hamilton. Her complaint was only followed up with her on 14 March 2019, when she signed the complaint.”

The IWCNZ stated: “Whether or not the threat was connected to the Christchurch killer is irrelevant.” It was part of a pattern of threats against mosques and muslim organisations, including an assault on the Imam of Avondale Islamic Centre, who was

“abused, physically threatened and had his car damaged in July 2017.”

The Al Noor mosque, where Tarrant killed dozens of men, women and children, had also been previously threatened, including in 2016 when neo-Nazis placed a box of pigs’ heads outside the mosque.

Police therefore had “enough intelligence to warrant a coordinated national strategy” to respond to such threats, the IWCNZ submission said. “If there had been such a strategy, then the message would have alerted every mosque in the country to a threat to one mosque on Friday 15 March 2019 and for all mosques to take extra security measures.”

Danzeisen criticised the royal commission’s procedures and findings, writing in *Newsroom* that “conflicting evidence remains unresolved” and “we as a nation will likely not know the actual full story” about the attack. She said the IWCNZ requested the ability to “be in the room to challenge testimony and evidence” from the state, but this was denied.

The final report on the Christchurch terror attack will go down in history as a whitewash of the police and intelligence agencies. At the very least, these agencies turned a blind eye to repeated warnings about the growth of the extreme right and the danger of violence against Muslims, including threats against NZ mosques and specific information that could have led them to Tarrant.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, acting on the royal commission’s recommendations, has promised to significantly increase the resources of the intelligence agencies and introduce tougher hate speech laws. These measures are not aimed against the far-right, which has been emboldened by the Labour Party’s anti-immigrant policies and its coalition with the racist NZ First Party, which controlled the foreign and defence ministries from 2017–2020. Many of Tarrant’s nationalist conceptions, outlined in his manifesto, resemble the rhetoric of NZ First and similar far-right parties that have been elevated by the political establishment in Australia and internationally.

In response to the greatest crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, the ruling class is promoting nationalism and xenophobia to divide the working class, while strengthening the state in preparation for violent crackdowns on any resistance. The increased state surveillance and internet censorship will be used against the working class as it comes into struggle against soaring social inequality, attacks on democratic rights and preparations for war.



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