Two years after Christchurch terror attack: Australian establishment covers up fascist danger

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The Australian political and media elite largely treated the second anniversary of the March 15, 2019 terror attack in Christchurch, New Zealand as a non-event. The fact that the perpetrator, Brenton Tarrant, was an Australian fascist, whose political radicalisation began in Australia, and who had documented links to extreme right-wing organisations in the country, was almost completely passed over.

None of the major corporate media outlets published commentaries, let alone editorials, marking the anniversary or examining the political implications of an Australian citizen carrying out one of the bloodiest far-right terror attacks in recent years.

Acknowledgements of the victims of the massacre, from the 51 people murdered, to the 40 others maimed and the scores more traumatised for life, were sparse. To the extent that their fate was mentioned, it was perfunctory and even off-handed.

The editorial disinterest extended from Murdoch-owned publications, such as the *Australian*, to the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the publicly-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Under conditions in which the "true crime" genre has reached saturation point on commercial television, there was not a single program devoted to the largest mass murder perpetrated by an Australian citizen in recent decades.

As is so often the case, the media coverage dovetailed with the line of the official political set-up, which in this instance has been to say as little as possible. Prime Minister Scott Morrison did not issue a statement, and nor did any other member of his Liberal-National Coalition government. Labor leader Anthony Albanese and his colleagues were also mum.

The purpose of the silence was to suppress any discussion of the questions that arise from the anniversary. Chief among them: Was there a relationship between the trajectory of official Australian politics over the past two decades, and Tarrant's attack? Two years on, has the danger of far-right terrorism abated or has it intensified, and if so, why?

The answer to the first question is obvious to anyone with even a passing familiarity with Australian politics. In his murderous onslaught on the two Christchurch mosques, Tarrant was targeting Muslims and immigrants, who have been subjected to relentless vilification by the Australian political and media establishment over the past 20 years.

Tarrant was born in 1990. He would have become conscious of political events in the early 2000s.

These were the opening years of the "war on terror," launched in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terror attack. Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, joined the US and Britain in declaring that society is in an all-sided war against "Islamic extremism."

In the first instance, this sought to legitimise the predatory and illegal invasions of Afghanistan, in 2001, and Iraq, in 2003, which together killed as many as a million civilians. There is more than a passing resemblance between Tarrant's attack, and footage of coalition troops gunning down Iraqi civilians from Apache helicopters, and the extensively documented war crimes perpetrated by Australian troops in Afghanistan, which included mass killings, slashing the throats of children and generally terrorising the population.

Alongside a battery of anti-democratic legislation, used for frame-ups and entrapment operations, especially against Muslim youth, and a dramatic expansion of police powers, the "war on terror" has an ideological component. Day in and day out, the official media and senior politicians have insisted that "Australian society" is imperilled by Muslims, who are routinely depicted as a hostile force. The most noxious examples of this xenophobia, from radio "shock jocks" and in the tabloids, are virtually identical to the positions advanced in Tarrant's manifesto justifying his attack.

As the WSWS has previously noted, Tarrant was 15 when a drunken mob carried out a race riot, directed at Muslim and Lebanese youth in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla. People who appeared to be of foreign extraction were set upon and beaten, as the crowd chanted nationalist slogans. They had been incited by right-wing media commentators and the state's Labor premier.

The promotion of Islamophobia is part of a broader onslaught against immigrants. Labor and Coalition governments have transformed Australia into a model for the persecution of

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refugees, denying them the right to seek asylum and in many cases, consigning them to concentration camps in the Pacific Ocean. Condemnations of these illegal practices by the United Nations and other international organisations have been dismissed with contempt.

At the same time, Labor and the trade unions, which abandoned any, even nominal, defence of the interests of the working class in the 1980s, scapegoat immigrants for the social crisis produced by their own pro-business policies. They routinely denounce "foreign workers" for "stealing Aussie jobs." Tarrant's manifesto favourably referenced this promotion of economic nationalism by the unions.

Tarrant was not only influenced by this reactionary political climate. He emerged directly out of the official promotion of anti-immigrant movements.

Tarrant's first documented political statements were online comments in support of groups involved in the "Reclaim Australia" protests that began in 2015. Attended only by dozens or hundreds of people, these anti-Muslim demonstrations were given extensive and often favourable coverage in the corporate press and were addressed by prominent politicians, including members of the Coalition government. Every extreme right-wing organisation that has emerged over the past six years, including the now defunct United Patriots Front, for which Tarrant expressed support, traces its origins to "Reclaim Australia."

As for the ongoing dangers posed by right-wing terrorism, it is clear that they are substantial. Early last year, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) chief Mike Burgess stated: "In Australia, the extreme right-wing threat is real and it is growing… In suburbs around Australia, small cells regularly meet to salute Nazi flags, inspect weapons, train in combat and share their hateful ideology."

Last November, Phillip Galea, who was also involved in Reclaim Australia, was convicted in a Melbourne court of plotting to attack "Muslims and lefties," including by blowing up the headquarters of left-wing organisations.

In December, an 18-year-old from the New South Wales town of Albury was arrested and charged with encouraging a "mass casualty event." The National Socialist Network (NSN), an avowedly neo-Nazi organisation, later admitted that the teenager had sought to join it. The NSN is led by Thomas Sewell, who was in contact with Tarrant in the years before the Christchurch attack.

The Coalition government has responded with hostility to any reference to the danger of right-wing violence, including from ASIO, whose pronouncements are generally treated as sacrosanct within the political establishment. Over the past year, government MPs have insisted that the real danger is from the "extreme left."

Last week, just days after the Christchurch anniversary, Burgess announced that ASIO would no longer refer to "right-wing extremism" but to "ideological extremism." This change was clearly made at the government's behest. In a warning of how this new catch-all phrase will be used, Burgess referred to "ideological extremists" who were "reactive to world events," such as "Black Lives Matter." The clear implication was that left-wing activists involved in protests against police violence would be treated as "extremists" and potential terrorists.

The government's line is part of a broader promotion of the extreme-right by the Coalition, which has intensified since Morrison's installation as prime minister in August 2018. In January, Morrison and senior government ministers refused to condemn former US President Donald Trump for inciting fascists to attack the US Capitol. Some government backbenchers openly supported the coup attempt.

As is the case internationally, the promotion of fascistic tendencies is aimed at shifting official politics even further to the right, diverting mounting social anger and discontent into reactionary and xenophobic channels, and cultivating a base that can be mobilised against the emerging struggles of the working class.

Labor, which is fully complicit in the elevation of anti-immigrant nationalism to centre stage, has sought to cover this up.

In one of the only references to the Christchurch anniversary by a Labor MP, Kristina Keneally, the shadow minister for immigration, wrote an article in the *Australian* calling for greater online censorship as the only means of tackling "extremism." In addition to absolving the political establishment of any responsibility for Tarrant's positions, such anti-democratic measures will inevitably target left-wing opposition, as evidenced by the censorship of the WSWS and other alternative publications already conducted by Google and Facebook.

Days after her article was published, Keneally was on the ABC's "Insiders" program, demanding that the government drop plans to increase the migrant intake when the coronavirus pandemic subsides, thus again promoting right-wing Australian nationalism.

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