

Coronial inquiry into Christchurch terror attack will continue cover-up of state agencies

Tom Peters
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On May 5, Coroner Brigitte Windley released her decision on the scope of her forthcoming inquiry into the Christchurch terror attack on March 15, 2019. Fascist terrorist Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people at two mosques, and wounded almost as many, in New Zealand's worst mass shooting outside of wartime.

The attack, motivated by racism and hatred of immigrants, shocked the world and prompted an outpouring of grief and anger among ordinary people. It was part of a wave of violence internationally inspired by US president Donald Trump and similar far-right political figures.

To this day, much remains unknown about how Tarrant was able to prepare his attack, whether he had accomplices, and why the atrocity was not prevented. A royal commission of inquiry established by the Labour Party-led government produced a report in 2020 that whitewashed the intelligence agencies and the police.

The commissioners asserted that Tarrant acted alone and nothing could have been done to stop his attack. The commission's hearings were held in secret and almost all the evidence presented to it has been hidden from the public.

The royal commission remained silent about the role of successive governments in Australia and New Zealand in stoking anti-Islamic hatreds, particularly by joining the illegal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Muslims have been subject to routine surveillance, harassment and demonisation by the state.

The coronial inquiry will continue what is essentially a cover-up on behalf of the state agencies and political establishment. A summary of Coroner Windley's decision states that she will not investigate whether there were any "missed opportunities by intelligence, counter-terrorism agencies and other public sector agencies" to stop Tarrant. She says a "key reason" for this decision is "that the security sensitive nature of the key evidence underpinning that issue makes it likely the coronial Inquiry would not be able to provide Interested Parties any greater access to that evidence [than the royal commission]."

In an initial coronial hearing in February, lawyers for

several of the victims' families strongly criticised the royal commission's secrecy. Lawyer Anne Toohey said: "It's very difficult to accept findings when the evidence that supports those findings hasn't been published." Tarrant's guilty plea prevented any evidence being aired publicly during a trial. The lawyers called for key issues to be re-examined by the coroner in a public forum, with the victims' families able to scrutinise and to respond to the testimony given.

Coroner Windley gives no justification for maintaining the secrecy of the royal commission, other than referring to "national security" considerations. The question must be raised: why do the police, intelligence and other agencies oppose full public scrutiny of their actions, and what they knew or didn't know, in the lead-up to the attack? What do they have to hide?

Following the March 15 attack, a member of the public in Australia revealed that in 2016 he had approached police after receiving an online death threat from Tarrant, but this was ignored. Similarly, in New Zealand, a member of Tarrant's gun club near Dunedin said that he had approached police about racist and violent conversations among gun club members that he overheard in 2017; again, police refused to investigate. Police in both countries claimed that these reports were never made.

Coroner Windley also decided that Tarrant's extensive international travel falls outside the scope of her inquiry, despite noting that his family believed it played a significant role in his conversion to extreme right-wing politics.

Windley said she was "satisfied" with the royal commission's extraordinary assertion that Tarrant had travelled "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." As with other claims made in the commission's report, there is no evidence given to substantiate this.

In the years leading up to the attack, Tarrant visited dozens of countries on six continents, including places such as

Ukraine and Poland, where there are significant neo-Nazi groups. He also donated to numerous far-right groups, including in Canada, the US and Austria.

Tarrant's involvement in the far-right scene in Australia also appears to be excluded from the new inquiry. He had links with the fascist Lads Society (formerly the United Patriots Front) in Australia, which tried to recruit him in 2017. Coroner Windley's 99-page document setting out her scope decision does not even mention this fact, which should be of central importance to any serious investigation.

Windley states that the coronial hearing will look at "whether Mr Tarrant had any help from others **on that day** [March 15], the emergency response efforts, and whether that response may have affected the survivability of the deceased" [emphasis added]. In other words, assistance that Tarrant may have received earlier, in preparing the attack, is outside the scope of the inquiry.

Windley will also examine how Tarrant was able to obtain a firearms licence. Police rubber-stamped his licence application despite the fact that his only referees were an "online gaming friend" and the friend's father.

Media reports have highlighted that the hearing will investigate Tarrant's use of social media and online activity going back to 2014. Windley has written to Tarrant demanding that he reveal the whereabouts of his hard drive, which police said they did not find at his Dunedin flat.

A thorough investigation of Tarrant's online activity could uncover his accomplices and associates—but that is not the coroner's aim. In her scope decision, Windley says she intends to look at the role of "online digital platforms," such as Facebook and YouTube, in radicalising Tarrant. There is no mention of investigating his connections with other far-right individuals and groups.

Seeking to lower expectations, Windley expressed "reservations" about whether this aspect of the inquiry will produce useful information. She writes that "any effort to substantiate a causal link between the attack and any specific online digital platform is likely to involve a high degree of speculation and assumption."

Windley emphasises that if Tarrant's "online activity can be shown to have played a material role in his radicalisation," then "consideration will be given to examining the extent of monitoring of users for extremist content by the relevant platform(s), then and now."

This makes clear that the coronial inquiry, like the royal commission, will seek to provide further justifications for surveillance and censorship.

The main response of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government to the Christchurch terror attack has been to strengthen the powers of the state. It has boosted funding and resources for the Office of the Censor, and expanded its

ability to take down online content deemed "extremist." The Christchurch Call initiative, involving dozens of governments led by New Zealand and France, as well as tech companies, is establishing protocols for global internet censorship.

These measures are not aimed at the far-right. Their purpose is to create a police state framework that will be used to suppress working class opposition to social inequality, the danger of a Third World War, and the refusal of the ruling elite to stop the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Ardern government, assisted by the corporate media, has suppressed any public discussion about the similarity of Tarrant's anti-immigrant views to those of the political establishment, including parties such as the right-wing nationalist NZ First, Labour's former coalition partner. Tarrant's manifesto, which expresses admiration for Trump and shows how he was influenced by the European far-right, has been banned by the Chief Censor.

The aim is to prevent the working class from understanding the source of the danger of fascism, which is being promoted by governments internationally. New Zealand and Australia are both supporting the US-NATO proxy war against Russia by funding and supplying the Ukrainian armed forces, which include neo-Nazi militias such as the Azov battalion. Domestically, sections of the political establishment and media have encouraged far-right protests against vaccination and public health measures.

As the crisis of global capitalism deepens and the ruling class responds by lurching ever more rapidly towards war against Russia and China, fascist forces will be utilized to suppress working class opposition at home.



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