

New Zealand's far-right terrorist Brenton Tarrant to appeal conviction

Tom Peters

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Brenton Tarrant, the far-right terrorist who murdered 51 Muslim worshippers and injured 40 more at two mosques in Christchurch on March 15, 2019, filed an appeal on November 3 against both his conviction and his sentence of life in prison without parole.

The attack was New Zealand's deadliest mass shooting and one of the most horrific anywhere in the world. It provided inspiration for other racist and anti-immigrant atrocities, including the 2019 El Paso, Texas, mass shooting that killed 23 people. The gunman who killed 10 people in Buffalo, New York on May 14, 2022, also expressed admiration for Tarrant in his manifesto.

Tarrant had originally intended to plead not guilty and to use his trial to espouse his racist and anti-immigrant politics. However, he pleaded guilty in August 2020 to 51 counts of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder and a terrorism charge. In November 2021, Tarrant, through his lawyer, claimed that the guilty plea had been obtained under "duress," indicating that an appeal was being planned.

Confirmation of the appeal a year later prompted an anguished response from survivors. Imam Gamal Fouda told the *New Zealand Herald*: "I believe that this will cause significant trauma in our community and that the terrorist will gain nothing from it." Temel Atacocugu, who received nine gunshot wounds in the attack, told *Stuff*: "He can't run away from accountability. He is a murderer and a terrorist who even killed a three-year-old boy."

A court hearing date has yet to be set. University of Auckland law professor John Ip told *Stuff* that the Court of Appeal could dismiss the application, because of Tarrant's guilty plea and because he was outside the normal time allowed for filing an appeal.

The Labour Party-led government is anxious to avoid any public discussion of the political roots of the terrorist attack and why it was not prevented. Prime Minister

Jacinda Ardern told the media on November 8 that she would not speak about Tarrant's appeal, adding: "I made a pledge a long time ago I wouldn't publicly name the terrorist from March 15 and that's because his is *a story that should not be told*" [emphasis added].

A royal commission of inquiry held in 2020 took place entirely behind closed doors. The vast bulk of the evidence it received, including submissions from police, the intelligence agencies and Tarrant himself, has been permanently sealed.

The final report from the royal commission whitewashed successive governments in New Zealand and Australia. It said nothing about the relentless promotion of Islamophobia and racism, particularly following the participation of both countries in the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The report also asserted that there was no way the attack could have been prevented by state agencies—even though Tarrant was reported to Australian police in 2016 for making an online death threat; and New Zealand police were later alerted to racist discussions held at Tarrant's gun club near Dunedin.

Days after the terrorist attack, the government banned the possession and distribution of Tarrant's manifesto. This is because the document reveals the similarity between his anti-immigrant views and those promoted by sections of the media and the political establishment in New Zealand and Australia, as well as former US president Donald Trump, who Tarrant admired.

The far-right "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory espoused by Tarrant, according to which non-white immigrants are "replacing" the white population, has been embraced by dominant sections of the Republican Party in the US and far-right parties across Europe.

Any hearing in which Tarrant was publicly questioned about his views would lay bare these connections, which the political establishment is determined to conceal as it

lurches to the right, promoting war and nationalism.

It could also shed light on Tarrant's visit to Ukraine in 2016. The royal commission's report mentions that his mother was particularly concerned about this because of the prominence of neo-Nazis in that country. Groups such as Right Sector and the Svoboda Party played a leading role in the US-backed coup in 2014 which removed a Russian-aligned government, sparking a civil war and, this year, in the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The Ardern government, as a close ally of the US, has sent hundreds of troops to Britain to train Ukrainian armed forces. It has joined in glorifying the Ukrainian regime while holding Russia solely responsible for the conflict, which is quickly developing into a Third World War.

The Labour government is anxious to avoid any discussion of the fact that the Ukrainian military and state apparatus includes groups such as the neo-Nazi Azov militia, which shares the "Great Replacement" ideology of Tarrant and uses the same Black Sun symbol that was emblazoned on Tarrant's rucksack and his manifesto. Tarrant's manifesto was translated and printed by Ukrainian fascists within weeks of the Christchurch attack.

Ahead of the 2020 trial, major media outlets made an extraordinary pledge not to report any of Tarrant's statements relating to his ideology if he took the stand—an act of self-censorship which Ardern had requested. No doubt, the same position would be taken if an appeal is heard.

Tarrant's guilty plea meant there was no trial and he has never been publicly questioned about the attack, including how it was prepared, whether he had accomplices, and about his connections with the far-right internationally. The Australian fascist group the Lads Society admitted to trying to recruit Tarrant, and he made donations to far-right organisations in Austria and North America.

Because of the secrecy of the royal commission, several of the victims' families and a number of Islamic community organisations have pushed for a public coronial inquiry into the attack. A full hearing is scheduled to take place from May 15 to June 9 next year.

Coroner Brigitte Windley, however, has already determined that the inquiry will not overturn the secrecy of the royal commission because of unspecified "national security" considerations. Nor will the inquiry investigate whether there were any "missed opportunities by intelligence, counter-terrorism agencies and other public sector agencies" to stop Tarrant. Nor will it investigate his

travel and links to far-right organisations.

The inquiry will be limited to examining what unfolded on the day of the attack, as well as how Tarrant was able to obtain a firearms licence. It may also examine his online activity.

In October, lawyer Nigel Hampton and others representing some of the victims' families requested that the counsel assisting the inquiry, Alysha McClintock, be replaced because of a possible conflict of interest. Hampton argued that it would be difficult for McClintock to maintain the necessary independence because her firm, Meredith Connell, "regularly worked for and with the police" in prosecuting cases.

The response of police to the mass shooting will be examined in the course of the inquiry, with some families questioning whether some deaths could have been avoided if police had responded faster.

Whatever decision is made regarding this application, the coronial inquiry is destined to be another whitewash. As with the royal commission of inquiry, its findings will be used to push for more resources for the police and intelligence agencies. The Ardern government has already exploited the Christchurch attack to bolster the powers of state to censor the internet and conduct surveillance.

Far from being concerned about the rights of Muslims and other vulnerable groups, the government's aim is to put in place the mechanisms for suppressing any opposition to its agenda of imperialist war, the destruction of workers' living standards and the rampant spread of COVID-19.

In every country, these processes go hand-in-hand with the ruling elite's adoption of anti-democratic forms of rule and encouragement of the extreme right in order to divide and suppress workers. This can only be stopped through the intervention of the working class, armed with its own socialist and internationalist political program, to put an end to capitalism and the nation state system.



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