

Feminists demand terrorism designation of Bondi stabbings by mentally ill man

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24 April 2024

In the immediate aftermath of two stabbing events in mid-April in Sydney, the capital of New South Wales (NSW), feminist commentators have demanded that both be designated as acts of terrorism.

The first attack in a Bondi shopping centre in Sydney's eastern suburbs on April 13 was carried out by 40-year-old Joel Cauchi. He stabbed 18 people, killing six and injuring 12 others before being shot and killed by a NSW police officer.

The second, some 48 hours later, was the stabbing of Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel in the Assyrian Christ The Good Shepherd Church while he delivered a sermon. No one was killed in the incident, which occurred in the southwestern working-class suburb of Wakeley.

Within a few hours of the Wakeley stabbing, NSW Police, acting in collaboration with federal Labor Prime Minister Albanese, rushed to classify it as a terrorist attack. At the time, virtually nothing was known about the 16-year-old boy alleged to have carried out the stabbing other than that he was Muslim.

A terrorism designation activated sweeping powers for NSW Police, the Australian Federal Police (AFP), and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) that override basic democratic rights for the state's population. Anyone convicted under terrorism legislation faces possible life imprisonment.

The response by a coterie of feminists to the Wakeley terrorism declaration was not to protest the rapid and pre-emptive classification but to demand that a new category be developed—that of “misogynist-based terrorism.” This, they argued, should be applied to Cauchi retrospectively due to the preponderance of women he attacked and killed at Bondi.

Such a terrorism category, they contend, is characterised by the killing of women by men “who ideologically hate women.” This argument is of a profoundly right-wing character. Its premise is the outright denial of the impact of mental health, or even its existence, on incidents of public and, in some cases, domestic violence.

This line reverses medical and scientific knowledge developed over a century, which highlights the direct relationship between the impact of objective conditions on the mental health and consequent actions of individuals and populations.

The UK-based *Independent* ran an article by psychologist Dr Jessica Taylor, who articulates more openly what is being put forward in Australia. Taylor wrote: “Why is violence against women and girls (VAWG) so commonly attributed to mental illness, as in Cauchi's case? If you're going to keep claiming that ‘mental illness’ causes men to go on killing sprees, you are going to need to explain why millions of people also diagnosed with the exact same ‘mental illnesses’ never hurt a fly—and why there is not a single ‘mental illness’ in the DSM/ICD disease and illness classifications listed as increasing the risk of committing mass murder ... The real ‘monster’ here isn't mental illness: it's misogyny.”

The argument, notwithstanding it being espoused by a psychologist, not only denies the profound social conditions that drive such actions. It also provides, even demands, that virtual dictatorial measures be taken by the very governments responsible for such conditions. The social problems that so tragically exploded in Bondi are to be dealt with by punitive retribution and punishment through the further strengthening of the state apparatus.

Such a classification would, in the stroke of a pen, eviscerate the clear responsibility of governments, state and federal, for the parlous state of the entire health system, particularly of mental healthcare. It would also whitewash their imposition of increasing levels of poverty and homelessness in NSW and throughout the country.

Schizophrenia, the condition with which Joel Cauchi was diagnosed in his teenage years, is, as University of Sydney Professor of Psychiatry Anthony Harris has explained, able to be well managed to enable sufferers to work and live happy lives.

Harris told SBS News: “The fact that we see things like (the Bondi Junction attack) happen reflects a system which

has allowed this gentleman to drop out of regular care and to lose contact with both family, community and a mental health system that should have been able to support him.”

Harris described a system so lacking in resources that rather than ensuring people remain well, the focus is on treating the very unwell when they present in crisis.

The funding of mental health explains precisely why this happens. SBS noted: “Last year, an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report found mental health issues made up about 15 percent of NSW’s total burden of disease, but its funding only equated to around 6.5 percent of the health budget.”

That the insecurity of unemployment, homelessness and poverty, lack of community support, and inability to access adequate medical treatment can affect people in different ways is not a phenomenon that is new to medical science. Under conditions where mass violence, including militarism and the threat of world war, looms ever larger, the most sensitive, vulnerable, and ultimately untreated become incapable, through their own efforts, of dealing with the growing stresses of life.

Cauchi was unemployed, alone, homeless and poverty-stricken. His terrible actions in Bondi have been widely acknowledged as the result of his mental health breakdown, triggered at least in part by the conditions under which he lived, including the lack of treatment. These conditions, as many mental health experts describe, are a perfect storm for schizophrenics as the disruption to their treatment results in a spiraling series of acute episodes.

Why Cauchi, and others, resort to violent acts is the outcome and interaction of complex social relations and personal experiences.

But when governments globally resolve problems through violence—war against their rivals and greater forms of oppression and suppression against the working class at home—the impact filters to those most unable to understand or cope with conditions they find incomprehensible and intolerable. That these layers emulate the violence they witness by their governments to resolve their own terrible circumstances is not difficult to understand.

The teenage boy accused of the Wakeley stabbing has also been described as “having a history of behavioural and mental health issues” requiring counselling and treatment.

In the course of his short 16-year life, like the rest of his generation, he has experienced continual and ongoing imperialist wars, particularly against Muslim countries. In the last seven months, he has endured the war of extermination by the Israeli state and hailed by all imperialist governments, including Australia’s. The death of 40,000 Palestinians, the majority women and children, with levels of brutality and barbarism only associated with the

Nazis, could have nothing but a profoundly destabilising effect on his young mind.

Whatever propelled him to the alleged attack at the church, such experiences cannot be dismissed as simply backdrop.

The aligning of the #MeToo milieu and the state apparatus that responds to social problems with the iron fist of repression exposes the class nature of identity politics. Behind the façade that “men” are the cause of all violence in society and must be punished, suppressed and incarcerated is the denial of the real division in society—class.

The #MeToo movement has form. It is, after all, #MeToo that has spearheaded the attack on democratic rights over the past years. The right of innocent until proven guilty, the right to remain silent and the right to due process have been the subject of withering assault in the highly publicised but ultimately failed accusations against actors Geoffrey Rush, John Jarrett and Craig McLaughlin.

Notwithstanding court victories, their once prominent and in the case of Rush, stellar careers, have been destroyed by unsubstantiated and unproved accusations of sexual impropriety. The concept that “the woman must be believed” eviscerates the democratic rights not only of the men accused but of all.

#MeToo supporters, a particular section of the identity politics milieu, represent a wealthy and grasping layer of upper-middle-class women who promote gender-based division in society, do so not to liberate women from oppression but to promote their own relentless climb up the corporate and media ladder at the expense of men.

They have no concern for the plight of working-class women who must deal with increasingly onerous and intolerable work conditions, whether it be in the health system, education or factories. Their situation is not so much as mentioned.

The main division in society is class—that between the working class and the capitalist class.

The right-wing trajectory of identity politics acts as a means of directing the blame onto the victims of government policy rather than on the capitalist class they represent.

The repressive measures to which governments are turning are directed against the working class—male and female—the only force capable of overturning capitalism, which, if not prevented, will inevitably lead the world into a new and more terrible conflagration.



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