

New book questions official finding that fascist Brenton Tarrant acted alone in Christchurch massacre

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A recently published book by University of Auckland researchers Chris Wilson and Michal Dziwulski sheds new light on the March 15, 2019 terrorist attack carried out by fascist shooter Brenton Tarrant in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Motivated by racist hatred of non-white immigrants and Muslims, Tarrant massacred 51 people and severely injured dozens more when he opened fire during Friday prayers at the city's Al Noor and Linwood mosques. He gunned down defenceless men, women, and children indiscriminately; the youngest victim was three years old. Ninety-two children lost a parent in the attack.

He Told Us: How an Australian Committed Far-Right Terrorism in Christchurch, New Zealand (Allen & Unwin) brings together much of the publicly available information about Tarrant's activities in the lead-up to the attack. It also provides new details about his radicalisation as a right-wing extremist, based on the authors' discovery of more than 400 messages posted by the terrorist on far-right message-boards on the website 4chan.

Most significantly, the book highlights glaring omissions and flaws in the report of the 2020 Royal Commission of Inquiry into the attack. They dispute its main findings that Tarrant "was a lone actor" and that there was "no plausible way he could have been detected except by chance."

In fact, Tarrant had spent years communicating with other far-right extremists and wrote several publicly accessible statements which made clear that he intended to commit a violent attack against Muslims in New Zealand. While these statements were anonymous, he did not go to great lengths to conceal his identity.

The Christchurch attack was New Zealand's worst mass shooting outside of wartime and one of the most deadly far-right terrorist attacks in the world. It left deep emotional and physical scars on hundreds of people and their families, and it inspired many other attacks targeting Muslims and other minorities, in the US and other countries. According to Wilson and Dziwulski, "more than 100 attacks or arrests for planning violence have occurred in which the individual involved was influenced by [Tarrant]."

Despite this, the attack is rarely discussed in the corporate media and is hardly ever mentioned by politicians in New Zealand or Australia, where Tarrant was born and raised. The seventh anniversary was barely acknowledged in brief social media statements by NZ Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Australia's Anthony Albanese.

He Told Us vindicates the analysis made by the WWSW that the Royal Commission's report was a whitewash of the police, intelligence and other state agencies. At best, these authorities turned a blind eye to the threat of far-right and anti-Muslim violence. New Zealand's intelligence agencies—the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) and Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB)—reviewed the Commission's

report and had the power to veto the inclusion of information.

The report covered up the role played by successive New Zealand and Australian governments in creating the environment which fuelled the growth of the far-right—including both countries' participation in US-led wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. These illegal imperialist wars were justified by relentless demonisation of Muslims by the media and political parties, including Australia's One Nation and New Zealand First. Wilson and Dziwulski's book does not mention these wars against majority Muslim countries, which would certainly have influenced Tarrant during his formative years.

Official secrecy

An extraordinary level of official secrecy surrounds Tarrant and his attack. One of the first actions of the NZ state was to ban possession of Tarrant's manifesto, titled "The Great Replacement," which elaborated his fascist ideology, hailed US President Donald Trump as a symbol of white nationalism, and laid bare the similarity of Tarrant's anti-immigrant and anti-Marxist views to those of "mainstream" right-wing politicians in Australia and NZ. As the authors of *He Told Us* point out, the ban has not prevented the manifesto from being circulated by far-right extremists internationally, but it has contributed to suppressing public discussion and analysis of Tarrant's views.

Former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declared that she would never speak Tarrant's name and told the media to restrict reporting on his statements in the event of a trial. Because Tarrant pleaded guilty he was never questioned in court about how he planned the attack and whether there were accomplices.

The Royal Commission's hearings—including its solitary interview with Tarrant—were held in secret. The commissioners permanently suppressed the vast bulk of the evidence and submissions they received, a total of over 73,500 pages, including 15,000 pages from the police investigation. Its final report consists largely of assertions that cannot be checked against the evidence they are supposedly based on.

Wilson and Dziwulski write that "Our requests to connect with the Royal Commission to discuss their findings have been declined... Similarly, our requests for information from government agencies have been denied on national security grounds." After the book was published, Wilson told TVNZ: "We've applied to interview the terrorist but we've not been given a decision yet."

The authors point out that the Royal Commission's terms of reference "built in an inability to find fault." Ardern assured the public that the

inquiry would look at “what all relevant agencies knew, or could or should have known about the individual and his activities,” but the actual terms of reference stated that it would concentrate on “what relevant state sector agencies knew about the activities of [Tarrant]” and what actions they took in light of that knowledge.

The exclusion of what *could or should have been known* about Tarrant significantly narrowed the scope of the inquiry. The terms of reference also meant, as Wilson and Dziwulski put it, that “the less agencies knew about him before his attack, the less they could be found at fault for not preventing it.”

As a result, the inquiry found that apart from Tarrant’s manifesto, which was emailed to parliament a few minutes before he began his mass shootings, “There was no other information provided or otherwise available to any relevant Public sector agency that could or should have alerted them to the terrorist attack.”

Tarrant’s online activity

Wilson and Dziwulski criticise the Commission for accepting Tarrant’s own statement that he did not frequently comment on far-right online forums, and that YouTube was a more significant influence on him. The researchers note that the inquiry did not investigate his use of Discord, despite knowing that he had downloaded the app, a popular means of communication in far-right circles.

They write that “the main investigating agencies informed us that their investigation of how the terrorist used [Discord] was ‘limited.’ When we sought to collaborate to try to retrieve the terrorist’s record on Discord, agencies expressed little interest in reopening this aspect of the investigation, describing the task as ‘academic.’”

The Royal Commission report says nothing about Tarrant’s very frequent use, at least since 2015, of the far-right /pol/ messageboard on the website 4chan. There he interacted extensively with racists and fascists from New Zealand, Australia and around the world, in posts that were publicly viewable.

This omission raises disturbing questions. Wilson told TVNZ: “We’re an unfunded, small university team and we found [the messages] five, six years after the attack.... Why did it take us to be able to find him that many years after the attack, when every other agency had the same information?”

Or was it the case that state agencies knew about the posts and either did not tell the Royal Commission, or instructed the inquiry to exclude them from its report?

Messages posted on 4chan are anonymous, but using relatively simple methods of textual analysis, Wilson and Dziwulski identified with a high degree of certainty more than 400 of Tarrant’s messages. In some cases, Tarrant identified himself as a man from Grafton, New South Wales. In others he stated that he was in Dunedin, a city south of Christchurch where he lived for almost two years while he prepared his attack.

In one thread highlighted in the book, on August 3, 2018, Tarrant complained that Dunedin and Christchurch “both have mosques, christchurch has two of them for f**** sake.” He also mentioned the mosque in Ashburton, south of Christchurch, which his manifesto stated that he planned to include in his terror attack. Another New Zealand-based user of 4chan replied by posting an image of a box of matches, to which Tarrant responded “Soon”—a clear threat against the mosques.

In the thread, “eleven different New Zealand-based posters discussed mosques in various locations in the country, some sharing Google Maps results to show the exact location.” Four users made violent threats against the mosques. None of this apparently triggered any response from

authorities.

Tarrant’s links with Australian fascists

Tarrant also interacted for years on Facebook with members and supporters of fascist Australian groups, including the United Patriots Front (UPF) and its offshoots, the True Blue Crew and the Lads Society.

Wilson and Dziwulski write: “His engagement with the UPF in particular accelerated over late 2016, becoming increasingly excited and emotional.” This was the period in which Donald Trump contested and won the US election, a result celebrated by the Australian fascists. After the election Tarrant commented on one of the UPF’s posts: “Globalists and marxists on suicide watch, patriots and nationalists triumphant.” He compared UPF leader Blair Cottrell to Trump, writing that he was “Looking forward to Emperor Blair Cottrell coming soon.”

The Royal Commission, however, downplayed Tarrant’s connection with these neo-Nazi organisations, stating in its report: “We have no evidence that the individual met with either Blair Cottrell or Thomas Sewell [another UPF leader].”

This was said despite the Commission being aware of the fact, as Wilson and Dziwulski point out, that Sewell “had personally contacted the terrorist [in 2017] to invite him to become one of the first members of the Lads Society.” Sewell had selected Tarrant from among 120,000 online social media followers of the UPF, indicating “that the terrorist had much greater involvement in the far-right movement and a closer connection to its leadership than the Commission suggests.”

Soon after the terror attack, Sewell confirmed that Tarrant had been active in the far-right “scene” for “at least three years.” He claimed that Tarrant had declined to join the Lads Society—even though Tarrant frequently posted in its private Facebook group. The Royal Commission’s report discussed only two sets of comments made by Tarrant in this group (the rest are part of the permanently suppressed evidence) including a post made on February 12, 2018, which threatened to attack an Islamic boarding school in Dunedin.

Two days later, according to *He Told Us*, Tarrant repeated the threat against the school in a public post on 4chan.

Wilson and Dziwulski dispute the Royal Commission’s finding that Tarrant did not discuss his plans with anyone prior to the attack. “In our view,” they write, “they reached this conclusion without adequately examining how he interacted online—and this severely damages the credibility of the report and makes many of its conclusions untenable.”

After Tarrant had supposedly rejected Sewell’s invitation to join the Lads Society, he continued to associate himself with the Australian fascists. In January 2018, he corresponded with Martin Sellner, leader of the far-right Identitarian movement in Austria, to whom Tarrant had donated \$2,308.97. In response to Sellner’s invitation to meet for a drink in Austria, Tarrant replied: “the same extends to you if you ever visit Australia or New Zealand. *We have people in both countries that would happily have you stay in their homes if you ever visit....* [Y]ou should contact Blair Cottrell... or Tom Sewell... the leaders of a movement similar to yours.” [emphasis added]

The Royal Commission dismissed the email as Tarrant’s “attempt to impress” Sellner by claiming a connection he did not have—a conclusion that is altogether unwarranted.

Later in 2018, Tarrant visited Austria along with several other countries in Europe, including Romania, Poland and Bulgaria. According to a report in the *Guardian*, “Tarrant booked accommodation and a rental car in Austria” in July, just one day after he received another email from Sellner.

The Royal Commission barely discussed Tarrant’s extensive global

travel, other than to assert that it was unremarkable and that “there is no evidence” that he met or trained with extremist groups.

The Commission’s report, Wilson and Dziwulski write, “provides no information about his activities in those countries that might reassure the public about the accuracy of this conclusion.” They also note that Austrian authorities were unable to account for one third of Tarrant’s eight-day stay in the country.

Did Tarrant have links to NZ far-right groups?

Tarrant’s email to Sellner raises another unanswered question: which people was he referring to in New Zealand who would have been happy for the far-right Austrian leader to stay with them?

Contrary to claims by the Royal Commission that Tarrant maintained tight “operational security,” Wilson and Dziwulski note that he showed “little concern about drawing attention to himself.” He openly bought and sold guns and accessories on TradeMe—the country’s largest online marketplace, similar to eBay—using the username “kiwi14words,” a reference to the well-known white supremacist slogan “14 Words.” The authors plausibly suggest that he chose this username when interacting on one of NZ’s most popular websites “as a way of establishing contact with other white nationalists and neo-Nazis in the country.”

Similarly, when he joined the website NZ Hunting and Shooting Forums, a gathering place for gun enthusiasts, Tarrant “chose the username ‘CommanderRockwell,’ a reference to the American Nazi Party leader George Rockwell,” which would have been easily recognised by other far-right extremists.

Small neo-Nazi groups have long operated in Christchurch and the South Island, and had made numerous threats against Muslims in the lead-up to the 2019 attack. In March 2016, the Al Noor mosque was delivered a box of pigs’ heads by one fascist group. Did Tarrant have connections with any of these groups or individuals, as he implied in his email to Sellner? Was this one of the reasons he moved to the South Island in the first place?

He Told Us highlights an unexplained car trip that Tarrant took to the small seaside village of Akaroa, near Christchurch, between March 6 and 8, 2018. The Royal Commission’s report mentions the trip in passing and “leaves it very unclear whether he stayed overnight in Akaroa, for how many nights, or where he stayed.” When he returned to Dunedin on March 9, Tarrant went online and wrote on 4chan, in a conversation that involved other NZ-based users, that he had “a plan” to deal with non-white people in the South Island.

Tarrant was able to easily obtain a firearms licence; the Royal Commission sharply criticised police for failing to do adequate checks before granting it. He engaged in frequent training at the Bruce Rifle Club from February 2018. A member of the public, Peter Breidahl, stated following the terror attack that he had spoken to police in late 2017 after overhearing members of the club making violent Islamophobic statements. Police told the Royal Commission they never received such a report.

As Wilson and Dziwulski write: “All the warning signs that can indicate someone is going to commit public violence were there. He openly purchased and modified numerous weapons and trained with them in public. He made his extremist views known both to family and strangers, stated on a public forum his intention to carry out an attack, and physically surveilled his targets on at least one occasion.”

Tarrant also made numerous donations, in the thousands of dollars, to far-right groups in Australia, Europe and North America.

Conclusion

The authors of *He Told Us* provide a scathing critique of the Royal Commission’s narrow terms of reference, its suppression of evidence and the gaping holes and contradictions in its report. Yet they do not offer any explanation for why the Commission proceeded as it did. They do not call it what it was: not a genuine inquiry but a cover-up and a whitewash of the state agencies.

The Auckland University researchers agree with the Commission’s most important recommendation: that the intelligence agencies must be given more resources. They state that if the NZSIS, the domestic spy agency, had been given “double the number of counter-terrorism staff” then it might have been more inclined to monitor far-right extremism, rather than focusing mainly on Islamic extremism.

This claim is utterly false. In actual fact, annual funding for the NZSIS increased dramatically from \$11.5 million in 2000/2001 to \$68.6 million in 2017/2018—a more than sixfold increase, which was justified on the pretext of preventing Muslim terrorism. For the 2026/2027 financial year the agency will get \$142,196,000.

By the time the Christchurch terrorist attack occurred, the intelligence agencies in both Australia and New Zealand had the ability to conduct warrantless mass surveillance of communications, as did the police.

While Muslims, environmental groups, anti-war activists and others had all been targets of state surveillance, the fascist networks in Australia and New Zealand were allowed to operate without interference from the state. This remains the case today. In Australia, the National Socialist Network, the rebranded UPF, led by Sewell, last year led major anti-immigrant demonstrations.

The explanation is political. The function of the state is to preserve capitalist rule and prevent the development of a socialist movement in the working class. The promotion of far-right extremism and fascism serves the same purpose by dividing the working class and scapegoating immigrants and other minorities for poverty and social inequality.

Wilson and Dziwulski’s book briefly discusses the anti-immigrant demagoguery stoked by Australia’s Prime Minister John Howard during the early 2000s and mentions the rise of the blatantly racist One Nation. But they say nothing about parallel developments in New Zealand’s political establishment—including the fact that NZ First, a far-right party which espoused anti-Muslim and anti-Marxist views similar to those in Tarrant’s manifesto, was a coalition partner in Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party-led government.

In the seven years since the Christchurch massacre, as the crisis of capitalism has deepened, official politics in every country has lurched even further to the right. The US-Israeli genocide in Gaza and their criminal war against Iran are supported by the Australian Labor government and the National Party-led coalition government in New Zealand.

To pay for the militarisation of society and integration into US-led war plans, both governments are carrying out historic attacks on public services and driving down workers’ living standards. The agenda of austerity and war is fundamentally incompatible with democratic forms of rule, and governments everywhere are moving inexorably towards fascist and authoritarian measures.

The Ardern government exploited the Christchurch terror attack to boost the intelligence agencies and the state censor’s powers. Ardern also launched the Christchurch Call to Action, an initiative involving dozens of governments and major tech companies, including Meta (Facebook), Microsoft, Amazon, Google and X, to establish tighter censorship and state surveillance of the internet.

Governments are carrying out a global war on online anonymity. This has nothing to do with stopping the far-right, which has been elevated to

state power in the US and controls social media companies like Elon Musk's X. The aim is to suppress opposition to war and inequality among ordinary people, and to monitor and stop the spread of socialist ideas. Most notably, the WSWS has been heavily censored by Google, Facebook and Twitter/X—all of which support the Christchurch Call initiative.

Workers and young people must learn the great lessons of history, above all the Trotskyist movement's struggle against fascism in the 1930s. This task cannot be entrusted to capitalist governments, which are the incubators of the fascist threat. It is necessary to build revolutionary parties in every country, as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to lead the working class in a conscious fight to end capitalism, and in doing so put an end to nationalism, war and social inequality.



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