

Australian PM uses police “sting” operation to demand expanded surveillance powers

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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison this week used the unveiling of the results of a secret international police operation, targeting organised crime, to launch an aggressive “law and order” campaign under conditions of rising social and political discontent.

Morrison hailed as “a watershed moment in Australian law enforcement history,” the announcement that “Operation Ironside” had resulted in some 500 police raids and more than 220 arrests of alleged dangerous criminals, and contributed to similar roundups in the US and other partner countries.

All the television networks contributed to the show of force by featuring footage of heavily-armed police smashing down the doors of homes, hauling away prisoners and seizing computers and other material.

At a media conference, standing alongside the Australian Federal Police (AFP) chief Reece Kershaw and the FBI Legal Attaché at the US Embassy, Anthony Russo, Morrison demanded the immediate passage of three bills to expand even further the surveillance and other powers of the police and intelligence agencies.

Morrison declared that these measures were now needed to “keep Australians safe,” claiming that this was the aim of “everything we’ve been doing” since he took over as prime minister in 2018.

The fraud of that pretext, however, was underscored when he included the 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19 on his list of the threats his Liberal-National Coalition government had supposedly addressed, as if people had forgotten the government’s failures and indifference to lives and livelihoods in both disasters.

In reality, the constant enlargement of police powers and resources is, above all, aimed at strengthening the repressive state apparatus, to combat the disaffection and unrest that has been intensified by these catastrophes, coming on top of ever-greater social inequality and attacks on working class jobs, wages and conditions.

Details of the three-year international police operation and the legal powers utilised in it remain unclear, but it reportedly involved an encrypted communications platform called ANOM, secretly run by the FBI, to entrap and record targeted individuals holding incriminating conversations.

The AFP-FBI partnership was said to involve covertly designing, administering and monitoring the ANOM app and placing it into the hands of crime figures. Kershaw indicated that this was just the start. He said 1,600 to 1,700 people used ANOM in Australia, accounting for about 5 percent of the encrypted phones in the country.

Police said the 25 million messages intercepted from ANOM could expand on information they already had to provide evidence to put people through court on serious and organised crime-related offences.

Such operations point to extensive police use of undercover agents, electronic surveillance and anti-encryption technology.

Morrison and Kershaw refused to answer journalists’ questions about whether the AFP had taken a key role in the transnational bust because it could use the Telecommunications and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. That legislation, passed with the Labor Party’s support in 2018, forces internet companies to facilitate the cracking of encryption, passwords and other privacy devices. Kershaw confirmed the use of the powers but would not elaborate.

Morrison boasted that his government had already “updated” the telecommunications surveillance laws, spent \$590 million to boost the capabilities of the AFP and other agencies, and allocated another \$1 billion in this year’s budget.

The prime minister accused the Labor opposition of stalling three bills. Kershaw publicly backed him, also demanding that parliament pass the bills as soon as possible.

The first bill is surveillance legislation to give the AFP and the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission greater online powers. The second is an International Production Orders Bill to give the security agencies access to overseas electronic data. The third is a Transport Security Bill to bar suspected “criminals” from working in or getting access to ports and airports.

Labor’s shadow home affairs minister Kristina Keneally protested, insisting that the only bill Labor had opposed was the Transport Security Bill, and that was for nationalist reasons. She said Labor was willing to support the bill if it explicitly required foreign workers in the industry to face the same licensing requirements as Australian citizens.

Speaking of Morrison, Keneally said: “He wants to put tougher protections to ensure Australians who work in our ports and airports are law-abiding citizens. OK, fine, you’ve done absolutely nothing to ensure that foreign crew, who come through our ports and airports, have to meet security requirements ... He fixes that, this bill can pass the parliament.”

Since the declaration of the “war on terrorism,” Labor has joined hands with the Coalition to pass more than 125 “national security” bills, containing more than 14,500 amendments to previous laws.

This has included multiple barrages of “counter-terrorism” laws, the 2015 “metadata retention” provisions, the 2018 encryption-cracking measures and the 2018 “foreign interference” legislation, which expanded the scope and penalties of the secrecy laws, as well as criminalising links with China or other “foreign entities.”

These police-state powers seek to legitimise and formalise, as well as extend, mass political surveillance. As revealed by WikiLeaks—published by Julian Assange—and US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden, the US-led Five Eyes network, of which Australia is a member, conducts electronic spying and data collection on millions of people worldwide. It also plays a critical role in conducting its members’ wars and war crimes, notably in Afghanistan and Iraq.

At the same time, the government is proceeding with two trials, being conducted behind closed-doors, over leaks that exposed the criminality of the intelligence apparatus. In one, former military lawyer David McBride is accused of giving the Australian Broadcasting Corporation the “Afghan Files” on the protracted cover-up of the Special Forces’ war crimes in Afghanistan.

In the other prosecution, a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) officer, known only as Witness K, and his lawyer Bernard Collaery could be jailed for exposing ASIS’s illegal bugging of East Timor’s cabinet office, on behalf of the Howard Coalition government, during oil and gas negotiations in 2004.

Behind the false banner of “keeping people safe,” the bipartisan drive to protect and bolster the police and intelligence apparatuses is aimed at preparing for political and class convulsions.

Under Malcolm Turnbull, Morrison’s predecessor, a 2017 “intelligence review” pointed to the global and domestic concerns wracking the ruling elite. It warned that Australia’s “national security environment” was being reshaped by the decline in the global influence of the US and the rise of economic and political disaffection. It declared that “heightened tensions and instabilities” were generating “a growing sense of insecurity and alienation.”

That was before the bushfire disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic, and the intensifying US-led conflict with China, which have exacerbated these social and political tensions. It is ruling class alarm over the rise of discontent in every country, including Australia, that is driving the “law and order” agenda of Morrison’s government and the whole political establishment.

The 2017 review featured expedited laws to call out the military to suppress outbreaks of internal “violence,” plans for a Home Affairs super-ministry to take command of seven surveillance and enforcement agencies, and the creation of an Office of National Intelligence in the prime minister’s office.

The Labor Party helped push all these measures through parliament.



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