

Coroner's inquiry begins into New Zealand's far-right terror attack

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28 February 2022

From February 22 to 24, the Christchurch Coroner's Court held an initial hearing to determine the scope of its inquiry into the deaths of 51 people in the terrorist attack on March 15, 2019. The hearing was held remotely due to the explosion of COVID cases in New Zealand.

The attack on the Al Noor and Linwood mosques in Christchurch by fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant was New Zealand's worst ever mass shooting, and one of the most horrific far-right terror attacks in the world. As he drove to the mosques and massacred defenceless men, women and children, Tarrant live-streamed the attack on social media.

The coronial process is the first public inquiry into the Christchurch shootings. Despite its significance, media reports on the initial proceedings last week were largely buried under an avalanche of coverage of ongoing anti-vaccination protests outside parliament, and the war in Ukraine.

Nearly three years after the events, the circumstances of the attack remain shrouded in secrecy, with many unanswered questions about why it was not prevented. Tarrant obtained a firearms licence in New Zealand and spent two years gathering weapons and learning how to shoot. He corresponded with and donated to far-right groups in Australia, Europe and North America, and travelled to dozens of countries, completely unmolested by the authorities.

The Labour Party-led government has suppressed critical discussion of the attack. The state censor banned Tarrant's manifesto, which revealed the gunman's admiration for Donald Trump, his sympathy for the police and military, and hatred of immigrants and socialists. It also made clear the similarity of his views to those of parties like the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First, and One Nation in Australia.

A royal commission of inquiry, which released its findings in December 2020, took place entirely in secret. The government ordered that all of the evidence submitted to the inquiry be sealed, including testimony from police, state agencies and Tarrant himself.

The commission, led by former Supreme Court Judge William Young and former senior diplomat Jacqui Caine, produced a final report, which was full of unsubstantiated statements, contradictions and glaring omissions. It whitewashed the intelligence agencies and police and simply asserted that "there was no plausible way [Tarrant] could have been detected except by chance."

The royal commission did not condemn successive governments, in Australia and New Zealand, which have stoked xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment, including through participation in the imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Tarrant's guilty plea meant that he could not be questioned during a trial about any aspect of the attack, including his motivation, how it was planned, and whether he had accomplices. He was sentenced in August 2020 to life in prison.

In November 2021, the terrorist's then-lawyer Tony Ellis claimed that the plea had been obtained by "duress" and that Tarrant had been subject to "inhuman or degrading treatment" while in prison, "which prevented a

fair trial." Tarrant was reportedly considering an appeal against his sentence.

Before the coronial hearing got underway, a number of lawyers representing victims' families supported an application by lawyer Nigel Hampton QC for Coroner Brigitte Windley to recuse herself due to the possible "perception of bias." Windley worked as an advisor to the police from 2007 to 2014. In 2015, she was seconded to the Office of the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security, which oversees the spy agencies.

After a 30-minute hearing, Windley denied the application. She said she did not know the individual officers who would be giving evidence to her inquiry, as far as she was aware.

Lawyer Anne Toohey, representing some victims' families, called for a "transparent hearing" in which all evidence could be presented. She told the court: "The family members simply haven't had the opportunity to understand what really happened." Regarding the royal commission, she said: "It's very difficult to accept findings when the evidence that supports those findings hasn't been published."

Toohey also raised disturbing questions about the police response to the attack. She recounted the traumatic experience of the family of Kamel Darwish, who was killed in Al Noor mosque. Police claimed that Kamel died instantly at 1:44 p.m., but records show that his phone made calls to family members, and sent a love heart emoji to his wife at 2:06 p.m.

Kamel Darwish was not taken to hospital; his body remained in the mosque overnight. After the shooting, his brother Zuhair phoned Kamel several times. Some of the calls were connected, but there was no voice at the other end. Believing his brother could still be alive, Zuhair travelled to the mosque and pleaded with police to do something. He says officers placed him in the back of a police car and threatened him with arrest if he did not calm down.

Kathryn Dalziel, a lawyer representing 13 families, said survivors of the attack at Al Noor were abused by police officers who arrived on the scene: "They tried to speak to the police, to say that the terrorist had left. They tried to tell them and were yelled at with guns pointed at them, to sit down and shut up." Meanwhile, Tarrant was driving to Linwood Mosque, where he killed several more people. He was finally arrested after leaving Linwood Mosque.

Dalziel called on the court to investigate whether anyone else had helped carry out the attack. "We have clients who say that they witnessed somebody else present on the day that they believe is not the terrorist [Tarrant]," she said.

Another lawyer, Aarif Rasheed, criticised the royal commission's suppression of evidence, including the interview with Tarrant. He said the commission had not looked in detail at Tarrant's international travel, including whether he received any training overseas.

The commissioners made the extraordinary claim that Tarrant had not met with far-right extremists during his extensive travels. This was despite the fact that he donated thousands of dollars to Martin Sellner, the leader

of Austria's white supremacist Identitarian Movement, in January 2018, and then travelled to Austria later in the year. Tarrant also visited a Polish village on the same day where the Knights Templar International (KTI), a white supremacist group associated with Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, was holding a gathering.

Tarrant had links with leaders of the Australian United Patriots Front (UPF) and its offshoot, the Lads Society, which tried to recruit him in 2017. The royal commissioners, however, asserted that Tarrant had no support from these or other neo-Nazi groups for his attack.

Following the attack, it was reported that, in 2016, a man complained to Australian police after Tarrant sent him a death threat on Facebook for criticising the UPF. A New Zealand man also said he had complained to police in 2017 about racist and extremist language used by members of Tarrant's gun club near Dunedin. In both cases, the royal commission accepted the police claims that no such complaints were made.

In response to Rasheed's submission, Coroner Windley said "it does seem slightly uncomfortable" that she was being asked "as a single Coroner," to reconsider issues that were looked at by a royal commission that had "a full-time secretariat, two commissioners of significant standing, and 18 months to dedicate to their investigation."

Replying to this point on the second day of the hearing, Abdul Razzaq, from the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ), said that "the issue of resources of the Coroner" should be "addressed appropriately by the Ministry of Justice."

Razzaq's own submission highlighted the Muslim community's lack of involvement in the royal commission. He said, "I put forward 184 questions to various agencies, but still have no idea if these were asked." The coroner's inquiry, he said, must allow "detailed questioning" to take place openly.

He called attention to the "failure of the royal commission to probe the private sector," including Facebook, where Tarrant participated in right-wing extremist groups. In addition, he said, it failed to properly investigate whether an IP address in Dunedin, identified by the intelligence agencies prior to the attack as having accessed Breivik's manifesto and material related to firearms, could have belonged to Tarrant.

Razzaq said the commission "simply relied on the statements of the NZSIS [Security Intelligence Service, GCSB [Government Communications Security Bureau], and did not probe any further."

He also said the commission did not appear to have investigated how Tarrant had obtained steroids, which are commonly used in far-right circles. Probing this issue could reveal whether he had associates in New Zealand.

Razzaq called for the inquiry to examine how Tarrant was able to obtain a firearms licence, which was granted by police despite Tarrant providing two inappropriate referees on his application form. One of them "had previous convictions," and the other "had been warned by police on arms-related matters."

Tarrant's new lawyer Ron Mansfield QC told the coronial inquiry that the Department of Corrections had only allowed his client to view the royal commission's report last month, and he alleges that it contains factual errors. Astonishingly, the shooter was only interviewed once by the commissioners, for a total of five hours.

Counsel assisting the Coroner, Alysha McClintock, defended the royal commission. She declared that its blanket secrecy was "for security reasons," without attempting to justify this. She also stated that the commissioners consulted with affected families and reported on the questions that they asked, as part of the findings.

In fact, the families had no opportunity to participate in the commission's hearings and to question the evidence presented by police, the intelligence agencies, or anyone else. Nor were the families provided with information about the content of the hearings. They, like the public

as a whole, were completely shut out.

Mark Zarifeh, a crown prosecutor involved in preparing the case against Tarrant, made a submission defending both the royal commission and the police investigation. He asserted that several matters the police had investigated "can't be taken any further; they've done what they can, they've looked at all the evidence."

He also said the issues raised by the families had already been dealt with at length by the royal commission—something that cannot be verified, since the evidence is sealed. Zarifeh stated that the coronial inquiry should not be "all in the public arena," citing "issues of confidentiality," which he did not attempt to explain, other than to say they were the same reasons the royal commission had to be held in secret.

Taken as a whole, the submissions to the coronial inquiry constitute a damning indictment of the royal commission. The hearing confirmed the WSWS's analysis that this process was never intended to uncover the truth of what happened, but to suppress information, and to whitewash the role of the government and the agencies of the capitalist state in the lead-up to, and the immediate aftermath of, the attack.

At the very least, the refusal of police to investigate leads that would have led them to Tarrant, shows that authorities turned a blind eye to the danger of far-right violence.

The danger of fascism has increased dramatically since the March 15, 2019 attack, thanks to the promotion of right-wing extremism by sections of the state apparatus and politicians internationally. In the United States, militias allied to Donald Trump attempted a violent coup on January 6, 2021. In New Zealand, Canada, Australia and elsewhere, far-right groups are leading anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown protests, which are being used to justify the criminal policies of allowing COVID to rip through the population.

In a submission to the coronial hearing, the Islamic Women's Council's Aliya Danzeisen said violent threats against Muslims are a regular occurrence, warning: "There is a clear and present danger within New Zealand that another attack similar to March 15 can occur again." She also pointed to the role of the extreme right at the Wellington anti-vax protest outside parliament.

The NZ political establishment is lurching to the right. The Ardern government is supporting the US war drive against Russia, while seeking to impose drastic austerity measures on the working class, and unleashing the deadly coronavirus.

The government's main responses to the Christchurch attack were to ban some firearms, boost the powers of the state to censor online content, and to introduce "hate speech" legislation. Through the "Christchurch Call" initiative, Ardern has joined other world leaders in demanding greater censorship of social media.

The target of these measures is the working class, not the far-right. Above all, the ruling class fears the emergence of a socialist-minded workers' movement, fighting against war and for decent living standards, and conscious of the danger posed by the extreme right.

The WSWS warns that the state apparatus has no intention of revealing the full truth about the March 15 attack. It will seek to control the coronial hearing, to censor its proceedings and limit its scope as much as possible, ensure that its outcome does not contradict the royal commission's whitewash.



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