

Australia: Documents prove former Labor government knew about PRISM

By Richard Phillips
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Heavily redacted government documents obtained early this month under Freedom of Information laws by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) “AM” radio program confirm that the previous Labor government was fully apprised of the PRISM global spying program conducted by the US National Security Agency (NSA).

One of the documents acknowledges that Labor’s attorney-general Mark Dreyfus received a detailed briefing on PRISM by the Attorney-General’s Department on March 21, two months before American whistleblower Edward Snowden exposed the NSA’s clandestine, antidemocratic activities.

Australia is a member of the Five Eyes surveillance group, which includes the US, Canada, Britain and New Zealand, and a key partner in PRISM and other data mining programs. PRISM allows the NSA to retrieve detailed information on millions of individuals from Skype, Google, Facebook, YouTube, Microsoft, Yahoo, Apple and other Internet companies.

Although the ABC requested various items relating to PRISM, dating back to 2007, Dreyfus’s secret briefing was not released. Only three documents—a total of nine extensively censored pages—were made available. A “talking points” paper prepared at the end of June for government ministers and officials about the impact of PRISM on Australian citizens was almost completely blacked out, as was a departmental summary of media reporting on Snowden’s revelations. Labor’s response to a parliamentary review of planned telecommunications security legislation was also censored.

The documents indicate that Dreyfus and other senior ministers were fully aware of the vast character of the NSA’s spying program and Australia’s intimate involvement in it. Labor’s response to Snowden’s

revelations was a combination of lies and political stonewalling. Dreyfus rebuffed questions by claiming that all “communication interceptions” were carried out in accordance with Australian law and that national security matters could not be publicly discussed.

Marching lockstep with the Obama administration, Dreyfus told a government security conference in Canberra in August that Snowden and US soldier Bradley Manning were not whistleblowers because Washington had not violated any laws. “Where an activity has been authorised under law and overseen by appropriate government bodies and where no wrongdoing has been identified, the disclosure of information is not ‘whistleblowing,’” he declared.

During six years in office, the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments were responsible for a further expansion of Australia’s domestic and international spying operations and laid the legal foundations to give the secret police agencies a virtual carte blanche in all their activities.

Labor changed the law to allow the domestic intelligence service, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), to spy overseas on anyone deemed to be a threat to “national economic well-being,” “security” or “foreign relations” (see: “Australian government expands spy agency’s powers”) and signed a series of statements with the US to increase intelligence sharing between the two governments.

The *Age* newspaper reported this year that Washington’s illegal drone assassination program in Central Asia and the Middle East was “critically dependent” on the US-Australian Joint Defence Facility at Pine Gap, in central Australia. Pine Gap, the news outlet revealed, was used to locate the targets marked for extrajudicial execution by President Barack

Obama and his officials.

In September, the *Guardian* and *New York Times* reported that the ASD (Australian Signals Directorate) has access to an NSA program, codenamed Bullrun, that can decrypt millions of email, phone calls and online business transactions in Australia. ASD is also in partnership with the British, American and Singaporean intelligence agencies to tap undersea fibre-optic telecommunications cables linking Australia, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

The Gillard and Rudd Labor governments sought even greater powers for Australia's intelligence agencies. Wide-ranging proposals made in June this year by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence will bolster Australia's terror laws and extend the repressive activities of the spy apparatuses.

One of the proposals is for the removal of all restrictions on domestic spying by the ASD and the overseas spy agency, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS, equivalent of the CIA). Under current law, these agencies need ministerial authorisation to conduct spying operations within Australia. Other proposals include the prosecution of anyone who fails to decrypt communications and electronic files when ordered to do so by the spy or police agencies.

Although these measures were put on hold, pending the outcome of the September 7 federal election, they will undoubtedly be taken forward by the Liberal-National coalition government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

Attorney-General George Brandis refused to comment on the recent Freedom of Information documents. He also refused to respond to questions about the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence proposals, but the Liberal-National Coalition endorsed the committee's recommendations. With the backing of the Labor opposition, the Abbott government is likely to proceed rapidly to implement these measures.

As Edward Snowden's revelations demonstrate, the vast powers and surveillance operations of the intelligence apparatus have nothing to do with "combating terrorism." They are directed against millions of ordinary people amid deep concerns in ruling circles in the US and internationally about the rise of social discontent and political opposition.

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