

Australian government to establish a “security” super-ministry

By Mike Head
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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced on Tuesday what he called “the most significant reform of Australia’s national intelligence and domestic security arrangements in more than 40 years.”

His announcement, while obviously seeking to shore up his own position in the increasingly fractured Liberal-National Coalition, represents another major step toward creating a police-state apparatus.

Turnbull said a new Home Affairs Ministry will take control over the key federal police and intelligence forces, as well as the immigration and “border protection” departments and agencies, bringing them under one minister for the first time in Australia’s history.

A new US-style Office of National Intelligence, headed by a Director-General of National Intelligence, also will be created in the prime minister’s office, expanding the Office of National Assessments.

The announcement was the second “security” proclamation by Turnbull in as many days. On Monday, flanked by masked Special Forces commandos, he unveiled expedited powers for the federal government to call-out the military to deal with “domestic violence.”

Turnbull’s government and the corporate media have gone into overdrive to present these moves as responses to a supposed increased danger of terrorist attacks. The prime minister and his home affairs minister-designate, Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton, yesterday blitzed the television and radio talk shows.

But like every other measure imposed since 2001 under the fraudulent banner of the “war on terror,” these steps contain far broader powers to monitor and suppress social unrest and political dissent.

The Home Affairs Ministry will bring together security agencies that have received unprecedented expansions in their resources and powers over the past 16 years. They include the main political spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the Australian

Federal Police (AFP) and the Australian Border Force (ABF).

Successive governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, have boosted these agencies on a bipartisan basis, creating an immense network of surveillance and repression, with vast powers. They can hack into computers, monitor all social media, detain and interrogate people without trial, and revoke visas and citizenships.

ASIO has more than trebled in size. The AFP has added an entire para-military arm. The ABF, which works closely with the military, has become a heavily-armed force that repels refugee boats, detains people at airports and hunts down workers and students allegedly violating or overstaying their visas.

The super ministry, supposedly modeled on Britain’s Home Office, will also take charge of the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission (ACIC), the Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre and the Office of Transport Security.

ACIC was itself established last July as a “super agency” with national criminal intelligence, information-sharing and law enforcement support functions. ACIC has “coercive powers” to secretly interrogate people and compel them to answer questions.

Other security agencies will also be strengthened.

Turnbull also announced that he will appoint his Cyber Security Special Adviser as the head of a 24/7 Australian Cyber Security Centre to boost “cyber security.” The Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), the primary electronic eavesdropping agency that partners the US National Security Agency, will be upgraded into a “statutory agency.”

The Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) will be authorised to monitor entire “classes” of Australian citizens overseas and supply targeting information to Australian military units, such as those in the US-led wars

in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Similar new powers will be handed to the ASD and the Australian Geo-spatial Intelligence Organisation (AGO), the military mapping agency.

At a media conference, Turnbull insisted the changes were driven purely by his desire to “keep Australians safe.” He declared: “It is not about politics. It is about safety—Australians’ public safety.” Anxious to head off public hostility toward the measures, he added: “This is not a United States-style Department of Homeland Security.”

To provide a fig leaf of legal scrutiny over this giant apparatus, the attorney-general will continue to issue search and questioning warrants under the ASIO Act, and authorise “special operations” under the Intelligence Services Act. These provisos were apparently added to Turnbull’s plan at the last minute in a bid to camouflage its authoritarian character.

Turnbull said the restructure was a “captain’s call.” He overrode known opposition by senior ministers, including Attorney-General George Brandis, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, Defence Minister Marise Payne and Justice Minister Michael Keenan. Apart from objections to the diminishing of their own powers, there were concerns in the cabinet that the new structure would too openly smack of a police state.

Some ex-security officials and media commentators, notably Greg Sheridan, the *Australian’s* foreign editor, expressed similar fears. Sheridan said the changes could affect public confidence in the security agencies. Other former security chiefs voiced concerns that the new ministry would be too bureaucratic and sprawling.

The government has refused to release the report of an intelligence review conducted over the past year by former top Australian officials Michael L’Estrange and Stephen Merchant, and Sir Iain Lobban, former director of Britain’s intelligence control centre, the Government Communications Headquarters.

To release even a declassified version of that report would give a glimpse into the political and strategic calculations being made in ruling circles. The state apparatus is being bolstered to deal with social and political disaffection under conditions of intensifying austerity, inequality and war preparations. The document could also reveal pressure applied from Washington and London for a revamp as part of the global US-led “Five Eyes” surveillance network.

Under media questioning, Turnbull said the review did not recommend the new super ministry. This only

underscored his immediate motives in elevating Dutton, a key figure in the Coalition’s conservative faction, as a “security tsar” to counter opposition from that faction and its former leader, Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull deposed as prime minister in September 2015.

Abbott has called into question the super-ministry plan, claiming that the security agencies themselves advised against it when he mooted the scheme as prime minister.

Opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten was quick to guarantee bipartisan support for the restructure, revealing that Turnbull briefed him before making the announcement. Shorten nevertheless called for the release of the security agencies’ advice on the plan and questioned Turnbull’s obvious anxiety to cling to the prime minister’s post by promoting Dutton.

Ever since Turnbull’s government narrowly survived last July’s double dissolution election it has been wracked by in-fighting, including public criticism by Abbott. It confronts deepening public antagonism. Many of its key budget measures to slash social spending remain stalled in the Senate because of fear of popular opposition.

Around the world, under the banner of the “war on terror,” the ruling classes are strengthening the state apparatus to suppress the public disaffection produced by the ruthless drive for corporate profit and the growing danger of war. In Britain, troops have been deployed on the streets in recent months. In France, President Emmanuel Macon has continued a state of emergency that has been used to suppress protests over his regressive labour laws.

This week’s security announcements are a clear warning that the Australian capitalist class and its political servants are moving in the same direction.

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