

Australian governments unveil sweeping new police powers

By Mike Head
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The Liberal-National Coalition federal government and the state and territory governments, most of which are controlled by the Labor Party, yesterday announced an extraordinary increase in police powers.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) summit agreed unanimously to sweeping new measures, including “real-time” use of facial recognition technology to monitor the population, 14-day police detention without charge, expanded powers to call out the military to deal with domestic unrest, and vague new criminal offences.

Yesterday’s announcement marks another nodal point in the bipartisan agreement of the Coalition and Labor to erect the framework for a police-state. The powers are truly Orwellian, that is, reminiscent of the totalitarian nightmare of universal political surveillance and repression presented by George Orwell in his novel *1984*.

The new powers add to the more than 70 tranches of “counter-terrorism” legislation already imposed on the population since 2001. The politicians, backed by the corporate media, claimed the measures are intended to “keep people safe.”

In reality, the “war on terrorism” has been a fraudulent cover for the evisceration of fundamental legal and democratic rights. Each of the latest measures extend far beyond combatting purported terrorist threats, and severely erode the civil liberties of the entire population.

The Labor Party premier of Victoria, Daniel Andrews, was the most explicit in dismissing any concerns about civil liberties, which he disparaged as a “luxury” of “notional considerations.”

Far from a “luxury,” rights such as freedom from political surveillance and protection from detention without trial were won through centuries of social and class struggle against absolutist regimes and capitalist governments.

In unison with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Andrews sought to depict the overturning of core legal rights as only affecting a minority of the population. “We are going to have to curtail the rights and freedoms of a small number of people in order to keep the vast majority of

Australians safe,” he stated.

Every authoritarian regime has made the same claim. An examination of the measures themselves demonstrates the lie that only a “minority” will be affected.

First, as some technology experts warned, the “national facial biometric matching capability” adopted at the COAG summit will permit police and intelligence agencies to quickly pick out any individual in shopping areas, large cultural and sporting events, and political demonstrations. According to the COAG communiqué, this system will be targeted at not just terrorism suspects, but “other criminal activity.”

CCTV, drones and other increasingly sophisticated photographic and facial recognition devices will enable authorities to almost instantaneously match facial images to those in a national database of passport, visa and citizenship images, now to be expanded by the addition of all state and territory driver’s licence photos.

Turnbull denied suggestions by some journalists that this could lead to “Big Brother” mass surveillance, but he confirmed that the technology could be used in public spaces such as shopping malls. The prime minister also admitted that unspecified “private companies” would be given access to the intelligence information.

Writing in the *Australian Financial Review*, Paul Smith described the plan as “horrifying.” It “would Hoover up the vast majority of the rest of us, and remove any notion of a right to expect privacy in our day-to-day lives (and yes, we have no Bill of Rights.)”

On the *City A.M.* website, Tom Chatfield, a technology author, wrote: “Imagine. A super-high resolution drone camera captures ten thousand faces from a crowd in one shot; an algorithm processes and identifies over ninety percent of them within moments; the results are cross-referenced with billions of bytes of other data, dating back decades. All of this is preserved indefinitely and shared widely, with corporations and governments tracking everything from credit and criminality to protest and voting patterns—and none of this process is either visible to you,

reversible or accountable.”

Second, even children as young as 10 will be subjected to federal and state laws that permit police to detain “suspects” for up to 14 days of questioning before laying charges. This applies to any terrorism-related offences, which are defined so broadly that they could capture a range of political activities, such as opposing Australian military interventions.

Justice Minister Michael Keenan told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation it was “deeply regrettable” that children could be held under the new powers, but he claimed Islamic State specialised in the “radicalisation” and recruitment of children.

As recently as 2015, Turnbull said such detention would be unconstitutional, because only courts have the power to “punish” people under the Australian Constitution’s separation of powers provisions. But now the state and territory leaders have agreed to meaningless “safeguards,” such as supervision by magistrates, that Turnbull claims overcomes the constitutional issue.

Just a decade ago, in 2007, a public outcry erupted when the Australian Federal Police (AFP) used “investigation” detention powers to hold an innocent man, Gold Coast-based doctor Mohamed Haneef, for 12 days without charge. That furore played a role, a few months later, in the landslide defeat of the Howard Liberal-National government. The incoming Rudd-Gillard Labor government was forced to promise limits on the power. That pretence has now been thrown overboard.

Third, two new serious criminal offences were unveiled at COAG—possessing “instructional terrorist material” and staging a terrorism hoax. These further widen the already vast scope for the authorities to use so-called anti-terrorism laws to organise provocations against broader expressions of political discontent.

Fourth, the COAG leaders agreed to yet-unseen legislation proposed by Turnbull’s government to expedite the domestic mobilisation of the Australian Defence Force. While Turnbull spoke of using troops “in the event of a terrorist incident,” the military call-out powers are tied to what the Constitution calls “domestic violence”—a term for political or social unrest deemed threatening to the existing political order.

This is not the end of the assault on democratic rights. Turnbull foreshadowed further measures. He said the Coalition, which has passed nine tranches of “national security legislation” since 2013, was determined to “stay ahead of the threat of terrorism.” Labor leader Bill Shorten has stated his “in-principle” support for the decisions at COAG.

Already, a previous COAG gathering agreed to a

“post-sentence detention regime,” whereby prisoners convicted of “serious” offences—not just terrorist-related—can be kept in prison, potentially for life, even after their sentences have expired.

Over the past three months, the Turnbull government has unveiled the most substantial revamping of the country’s “security” apparatus since the global political convulsions of the 1960s and 1970s. This includes plans for a Home Affairs super-ministry to take command of seven agencies, such as the AFP, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and Australian Border Force (ABF), and a new US-style Office of National Intelligence (ONI) in the prime minister’s office, headed by a Director-General of National Intelligence.

In June and August this year, the federal and state governments, aided by the media, laid the propaganda basis for the latest measures by exploiting dubious terrorist incidents, one involving a hostage-taking by a mentally unstable young man, and an implausible “airport” plot to blow up a plane with a bomb encased in a meat grinder or kill the passengers using rotten egg gas.

The WSWS warned at the time that the manner in which governments seized on these events pointed to plans for another boosting of police-state powers. As a recent intelligence review revealed, ruling circles are wracked by immense political fears, related to rising social and political disaffection and the prospect of mass opposition to its mounting preparations for war. The review highlighted the global turmoil and uncertainties produced by the Trump administration, and the seething discontent in every country, including Australia, generated by ever-greater social inequality.

These are the concerns that are driving the endless escalation of police powers, not a threat from a relative handful of terrorists. Parallel build-ups of the capitalist state apparatus are underway internationally, such as in France, where President Emmanuel Macron’s regime is demanding permanent emergency powers. These developments are a warning of preparations for dictatorial methods of rule.

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