

Australian cabinet files affair used to ramp-up “security” and US intelligence ties

By Mike Head
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In circumstances that are entirely unclear, the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) this week published selected excerpts from classified cabinet documents that it reportedly obtained after they were left inside two filing cabinets sold at a second-hand shop in Canberra.

Many questions remain about the ABC’s account of how it acquired the files, all of which were said to be classified, some as “top secret” or “AUSTEO,” which means they were meant to be seen by Australian officials only.

According to the ABC, an unnamed person bought the two cabinets, which sat unopened for months until their locks were broken with a drill. No date has been provided as to when the files were then discovered, revealing “the inner workings of five consecutive governments.”

One thing is clear, however: the supposedly “alarming” discovery of the files is being exploited, including by the ABC itself, to demand a crackdown on “security lapses.” This means strengthening the already vast “national security” apparatus of surveillance agencies, and reinforcing ties to the US-led global military and intelligence network.

In its capacity as the “national broadcaster,” the ABC is conducting the entire affair from that standpoint. It is essentially aiding the campaign being waged by the government and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), at the urgings of Washington, to impose unprecedented “foreign interference” bills that severely punish “security breaches,” threaten basic democratic rights and justify preparations for war, especially targeting China.

Explaining the ABC’s decision to publish some excerpts, ABC News director Gaven Morris said the most important issue was “the very story of there being security lapses around the containment of these documents.” In other words, the ABC’s focus was on

highlighting the alleged “security lapses,” not the contents of the files.

The ABC’s coverage of “The Cabinet Files” affair quickly headlined concerns that it could compromise the Australian political, military and intelligence establishment’s links with the US and other allies. This morning’s lead article on the ABC news web site began with “warnings” that “Australia’s relationship with its allies may be in jeopardy.”

The article reported: “The ABC understands there has been ‘chatter’ amongst Australia’s Five-Eyes intelligence partners—the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand—about the security breach.”

ABC News director Morris earlier emphasised that the ABC had taken steps to ensure that it did not publish or broadcast any stories that had a “national security implication.”

Last night, ASIO officers took possession of the documents from ABC offices under an agreement between the ABC and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Both bodies issued statements saying they had “agreed on the securing of and the return of the documents.”

In effect, the ABC has acted as a censor to prevent the public from learning anything about the discussions conducted in cabinet, behind the backs of the population, about crucial issues.

Cabinet’s national security committee controls Australia’s security, intelligence and defence agenda, handles relations with the Pentagon, deploys the military and approves kill, capture or destroy missions.

This includes the Australian military’s prolonged involvement in the US-led interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, the growing integration of the armed forces into the US war machine, the mass surveillance of the population revealed by WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden, and the preparations for war against

China and North Korea.

If the files were as extensive as reported—1,500 sensitive documents—they would certainly cover these topics and many more. One file listed 195 classified documents that were reportedly left in the office of Senator Penny Wong, a member of the last Labor government’s national security committee, after Labor lost the 2013 election.

Among those documents, dated from 2010 to 2013, were dozens dealing with Australia’s participation in US military preparations, including “A strategy for dealing with China,” “Australian participation in the United States Review of its Global Force Posture” and various plans for a possible war against Iran.

Also listed were national security briefs, Afghan war updates and intelligence on Australia’s neighbours. The ABC said none of these documents was among those left in the filing cabinets, but the list provides a glimpse of the type of material that the ABC decided to keep from the population’s view.

Among the document excerpts broadcast by the ABC, two relate to alleged earlier security breaches. One deals with Wong’s documents. It highlights internal emails reporting that “nearly 200 top-secret code word protected and sensitive documents” were discovered in Wong’s former office, and were later destroyed by security staff.

According to the ABC, the other file says the Australian Federal Police (AFP) lost nearly 400 cabinet national security documents in five years. When the AFP objected, claiming that more than 90 percent of the missing documents were later found or confirmed to have been destroyed, an ABC spokeswoman said agencies had been given sufficient time to respond before publication. This further points to the close collaboration between the ABC, the AFP, ASIO and other intelligence agencies in preventing any release of revealing or incriminating material.

Further files released by the ABC show that, in 2007, Prime Minister John Howard’s national security committee discussed removing the legal right to remain silent when questioned by the AFP. That move was apparently dropped after the politically-orchestrated arrest of Indian doctor Mohammed Haneef on terrorism allegations backfired when lawyers exposed the lack of any evidence against him.

Another report in “The Cabinet Files” says Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his senior ministers were warned about “critical risks” of his Labor government’s home insulation scheme in 2009, before the deaths of four young installers. Rudd is now suing the ABC over that

report, which is seemingly based on cabinet files that were previously released to a 2013–14 inquiry into the scheme.

Other files show that in preparing the 2014 budget, Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s budget “razor gang” considered banning any unemployed worker under 30 from accessing income support. Another file says that the right-wing News Corp columnist Andrew Bolt, who had breached section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, was consulted when the federal government moved to change the clause.

None of these files reveal much that was not already known or canvassed at the time.

One document states that in late 2013, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison arranged for ASIO to delay security checks, and for tribunals to push back cases, to prevent refugees from being granted permanent protection visas. That damning revelation, however, was brushed aside by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and buried in the corporate media. Turnbull said Morrison, who is now the treasurer, did “an outstanding job in securing our borders” and “stopped the boats.”

Significantly, the Labor Party’s response to the document affair has been to criticise Turnbull’s Liberal-National Coalition government for endangering relations that are pivotal to the US military-strategic alliance. Shadow treasurer Chris Bowen said: “This is embarrassing for the country, it is embarrassing to our allies who share intelligence with us and assume that we will be able to keep it. This is a blunder of massive proportions.”

As it has done since World War II, Labor is anxiously defending, and seeking to deepen, the intimate and secretive ties to the American ruling class. These linkages have intensified since 2010–11, when Julia Gillard’s Labor government aligned itself completely behind the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” to confront China.

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