

Australian intelligence chief says no need for “reset” after New Zealand fascist attack

By Mike Head
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Australia’s political spy agency boss told a Senate estimates hearing this week there was no reason to refocus intelligence gathering on right-wing extremism, despite an Australian white supremacist being charged with the killing of Muslims at two mosques in Christchurch on March 15.

Governments and state agencies continue to insist that Brenton Tarrant was a “lone wolf” whose homicidal plans could not have been detected, even though he had personal connections with a fascistic network in Australia, as well as across Europe and the US.

Despite the apparent failure to detect and prevent Tarrant’s atrocity, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) director-general Duncan Lewis told the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee on Monday:

“The events of Christchurch ... don’t really change the calculus here. There’s no early evidence to me that there will be some dramatic reset around this.”

Throughout his self-contradictory testimony, Lewis provided no explanation for the lack of knowledge of Tarrant’s on-line activities, yet claimed that ASIO and its partner agencies had been “very interested in right-wing extremism” for many years.

“This is something which we have been involved in for 30, 40 years,” Lewis testified. “We have people in our organisation that are committed as their day job to the issue of right-wing extremism.”

Lewis’s testimony raises further questions about how the on-line messages of Tarrant and his associates supposedly went unnoticed by the intelligence and police agencies. As well as the European alt-right and white racist groups to which he paid tribute in his manifesto, Tarrant had known links to similar organisations in Australia.

During a 10-month period in 2016–17 Tarrant made more than 30 comments on the then publicly-available Facebook pages of two Australian far-right groups, the United Patriots Front (UPF) and the True Blue Crew, both notorious for inciting hostility toward Muslims and other immigrants.

Lewis flatly refused to comment on whether membership of far-right organisations was increasing, even though he described them as “better organised” than earlier such groups. “I’d rather not comment,” he said. The Senate committee members accepted his stance without question.

Nor would Lewis comment on co-operation between right-wing groups in Australia and overseas. “I wouldn’t be in a position to comment on that, I’m sorry,” Lewis stated. At the same time, he insisted that ASIO was “in contact with many, many friendly and allied agencies” about the rise of right-wing groups in Europe.

Lewis indicated an acceptance of fascistic groups as politically legitimate. “There is a right-wing extremist element—nothing wrong with that, except when it ventures into violence,” he said. “That’s when ASIO’s interests are engaged.”

The director-general said the same rule applied to “left-wing” organisations, essentially bracketing them with the fascists.

In effect, Lewis relativised the fascistic killing of 50 people. The right-wing threat had to be seen “in a perspective” that “we need to be very conscious of,” he declared.

The ASIO chief said there had been seven terrorist attacks and 15 thwarted attacks in Australia over the past five years. “Of those 22 incidents, one was allegedly perpetrated by a right-wing extremist, and that case is still before the courts.”

Based on ASIO's highly dubious depiction of all violent attacks by deranged individuals or far-fetched supposed plots as cases of "Islamic terrorism," Lewis's assertion was that far-right terrorists are a far lesser threat.

Lewis's focus on "Islamic terrorism" is suggestive of the rhetoric of the white supremacists themselves, who incite fears of a "Muslim invasion" to peddle their nationalist and fascistic propaganda. Such poison permeates the political and media establishment. Muslims and other immigrant groups, including those from Africa, are constantly accused of violent tendencies, and blamed for the deteriorating social conditions experienced by millions of working people.

Later during his testimony, Lewis said ASIO was doing "everything that we can" to assist "our New Zealand colleagues" in the wake of the Christchurch attack. Again, he refused to provide any details.

Lewis's responses highlight the many unanswered questions about how Tarrant was able to proceed with his attack. In particular, did these state agencies deliberately turn a blind eye to the plans of Tarrant and other fascists?

There are known to be close relations between the far-right groups and state agencies across Europe. In his manifesto, Tarrant boasted that "hundreds of thousands" of European soldiers and police belong to "nationalist groups."

There was a similar official response when Australian Federal Police (AFP) commissioner Andrew Colvin appeared before the same Senate committee on April 4. He refused to specify how many AFP officers were monitoring white supremacists and right-wing groups, but said the number had not changed since the New Zealand massacre.

Colvin said 200 officers were dedicated permanently to counter-terrorism, "supported by a great number of intelligence officers, surveillance officers, technical support officers." The "range of people" would "surge as we need them" and similar units existed at state and territory levels. This gives some idea of the extensive spying and undercover operations conducted by the police.

Like Lewis, Colvin relativised far-right violence. He said police operations had to remain focussed "equally" on "extremism in all its forms... We draw no distinction between what may be behind the origin of

that extremism."

Colvin defended the AFP's refusal to give feedback to people who had complained previously to the AFP about threats of right-wing violence to themselves personally. Colvin's only explanation was that it was not always a "law enforcement issue."

While covering up the role of the police and intelligence agencies, the Liberal-National Coalition government is exploiting the Christchurch attack to further expand their powers and resources.

With the Labor Party's bipartisan support, last week's federal budget handed billions more dollars to these agencies. ASIO will receive \$557.8 million over four years, of which \$60.6 million is for "new measures." The AFP will get an extra \$512.8 million over the same period, mostly to enhance its "digital surveillance capabilities." The electronic spy agency, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), will receive \$4 billion through to 2023 for a "Cyber Security Response Fund."

The ASIO and AFP testimony is another warning. Alarmed by the growing social unrest, the ruling elite in Australia and its agencies, as in other countries, are facilitating the rise of extreme right-wing movements that will be directed above all against class conscious workers and socialists.

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