

Another police-state raid in Australia to protect spy agencies

By Mike Head
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In a further move to block leaks exposing the criminal activities of the US-linked Australian surveillance and military agencies, Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers spent almost eight hours searching the Canberra home of a senior intelligence official on Wednesday. They left carrying large black plastic bags, reportedly containing evidence.

Police pointedly refused to state the reason for the early morning raid on the house of Cameron Gill. He works for the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), the electronic spy agency that forms a key part of the global “Five Eyes” network led by the US National Security Agency.

Gill is a significant target. He has been a top-level adviser to a succession of key government ministers and is also the husband of Australia’s ambassador to Iraq, Joanne Loundes. The crackdown on whistleblowers is taking place at the highest echelons of the political and security establishment.

Far from backing away from such raids in response to widespread outrage over the attack on free speech and the public’s right to know the truth, Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s government is stepping up the offensive. Morrison personally endorsed the raid, saying the police were “just doing their job.”

The raid came just three months after intimidating raids against journalists accused of exposing damaging government secrets.

News Corp senior political editor Anikka Smethurst, had published documents revealing plans to legalise internal spying by the ASD. A day after ransacking Smethurst’s Canberra home in June, the AFP spent a day searching the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) Sydney headquarters. That was over the publication of stories by Dan Oakes and Sam Clark about the protracted official cover-up of war

crimes by Australian Special Forces units involved in the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

The latest raid is almost certainly connected to a hunt for the source of Smethurst’s April 2018 story. She revealed secret correspondence between Defence Department secretary Greg Moriarty and Home Affairs secretary Mike Pezzullo about how the ASD’s electronic surveillance capabilities could be used to target people within Australia.

Last month, Pezzullo bluntly told a parliamentary committee inquiry into the police raids that the person who leaked the documents to Smethurst should “go to jail for that.” He declared that the police were homing in on the source of the story, effectively foreshadowing Wednesday’s raid and prejudicing any resulting trial.

Currently, the ASD is legally barred from domestic spying, but previous documents released by WikiLeaks and NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden proved that this is a sham. The material showed that the ASD and its Five Eyes partners spy on millions of people around the globe, as well as rival governments, and freely exchange data with each other.

In its submission to the parliamentary inquiry, the ASD insisted that police action was essential to stop “unauthorised disclosures” that would “undermine Australia’s relationships with international partners.”

This confirmed the little-reported statement by AFP acting chief Neil Gaughan, the day after the ABC raid, that its purpose was to protect access to the Five Eyes network. Gaughan’s remark pointed to the pressure coming from the Trump administration to ensure that information about the activities of the US spy and military forces is kept from public view.

As well as the police raids, two closed-door trials are being prepared over revealing leaks. In one, former military lawyer David McBride is accused of giving the

ABC the “Afghan Files” on the Special Forces cover-up. In the other, a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) officer, known only as Witness K, and his lawyer Bernard Collaery could be jailed for up to two years for exposing ASIS’s illegal bugging of East Timor’s cabinet office during oil and gas negotiations.

Despite the public outcry over the police raids and trials, the Labor Party, which has a long record of total commitment to the US military alliance and to bolstering the powers of the state apparatus, has effectively backed them. Labor leader Anthony Albanese only said he was not “comfortable” with the government’s attitude toward press freedom. He suggested modifications to the existing regime for whistleblowers to supposedly report their concerns within official channels.

News Corp Australia executive Campbell Reid condemned Wednesday’s latest raid, saying the AFP was engaged in a “process of intimidation” to prevent whistleblowers from speaking with journalists. Yet Reid, like all the corporate media commentators, as well as the Labor Party and Greens, remained silent on the most significant victims of all—WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

The precedent for the Australian raids was set when Assange was dragged out of Ecuador’s London embassy by British police on April 11, to immediately face extradition to the US on espionage charges that could see him jailed for life or executed. The seizure of Assange followed the imprisonment of Manning for refusing to testify against him before a US grand jury.

Assange and Manning are being persecuted for revealing the atrocities, regime-change conspiracies and mass surveillance conducted globally by the US and its allies, including Australia.

Morrison and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton have denied plans to authorise domestic spying by the ASD. But they have appointed the head of the ASD, Mike Burgess, to become the next chief of the internal surveillance agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

On the same day as the latest raid, the outgoing ASIO boss, Duncan Lewis, said consideration must be given to handing domestic spying powers to the ASD. Addressing the Lowy Institute, Lewis claimed that Australia faced “unprecedented” and “existential”

threats from espionage and “foreign interference.” These dangers “by far and away” exceeded those of terrorism, he asserted.

Lewis refused to name China, despite being directly invited to do so by his audience, but his declaration feeds into the intensifying media and political witch hunt against Beijing. This ideological warfare is bound up with the Australian ruling class’s commitment to support Washington’s economic and military offensive against China, designed to reassert US global hegemony.

Duncan’s speech is another indication that plans are being made for arrests and prosecutions under the sweeping “foreign interference” laws that the Liberal-National government and Labor opposition pushed through parliament last year. The draconian legislation is a threat to anyone opposed to the confrontation with China, and other expressions of political dissent.

Duncan’s switch from terrorism to “foreign interference” matches that made by the Trump administration, whose Pentagon strategic review made a parallel shift last year, explicitly naming China and Russia as the primary threats to the security of the US.

During the ongoing “war on terrorism” launched by Washington in 2001, Australian governments have imposed 75 pieces of legislation boosting the powers of the police, military and intelligence agencies. As the WSWS always warned, this police-state framework will be used to suppress opposition to war and the accompanying assault on basic democratic rights.

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