



Fear and Loathing: Australia and Counter-Terrorism

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Theme: Australia's approach to counter-terrorism.

Summary: Unlike many of its Western counterparts and Asia-Pacific neighbours, until recently Australia has had little direct experience of terrorism. Yet the events of 9/11 shocked Australia from its complacency and since then counter-terrorism has occupied a central position in national political debates. Canberra has adopted a two-tiered approach to counter-terrorism. At the international level the fulcrum upon which its counter-terrorism policies rest is Canberra's military alliance with the United States. At the domestic level, the Australian government has responded to the threat by hardening the state's investigative and punitive powers. Yet undermining the effectiveness of policies at both levels are a set of erroneous assumptions about the nature and causes of terrorism. As such, Canberra's approaches to the threat of terrorism are unlikely to yield long-term benefits in terms of regional or national security.

Analysis: Writing soon after the attacks of September 11, Davis Bobrow observed that,

'... the current administration has adopted policies unlikely to meet the test of successful security policy put forward a half-century ago on the eve of World War II - fostering a context in which Americans can live with substantial freedom from fear... In large measure, that is because of incentives and dynamics built into our policy processes and deeply rooted popular beliefs. Whether for those or other reasons, the consequence has been to wage the war on terrorism in ways counter to established criteria for successful great-power statecraft. We are on a dangerous path for reasons far more troubling than those emphasized in critical allegations about the psychological dynamics of the current President Bush or the sincerity or moral character of his administration.'¹

The same critical analysis can be applied to Australia's approach to counter-terrorism, which under the guidance of the conservative national government of Prime Minister John Howard has been carefully calibrated to match that of the United States. Indeed, the Howard government perceives such a symmetry of US and Australian interests on this matter that it has deliberately crafted an approach to counter-terrorism, particularly as it relates to the threat of terrorist violence in neighbouring Southeast Asia, that is little more than as an Asian-Pacific appendage of the larger global strategy of the Bush administration.

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¹ Davis B. Bobrow, 'Losing to Terrorism: An American Work in Progress', *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 35, nr 3, 2004, p. 362-3.

Obviously, the extraordinarily close cooperation between Canberra and Washington has its benefits, particularly in terms of the sharing of raw intelligence and in the capacity to draw on regular exchanges of intelligence analysis between the respective US and Australian intelligence communities to sharpen both nations' abilities to anticipate terrorist behaviour in Southeast Asia. And on this front, US-Australian cooperation has yielded some successful counter-terrorism breakthroughs.

But there are also significant costs associated with the Howard government's unequivocal support for the Bush administration's War on Terror, not the least being the political pressure exerted on Australian intelligence analysts to produce assessments that are consistent with those preferred by the White House. Many of the same misdiagnoses and politically-motivated misrepresentations of 'facts' reflected in the Bush administration's approach to terrorism have therefore been reproduced in the Australian context.

Most of these costs, which at a crude empirical level can be measured by the spreading rather than the retreat of anti-Western violence since the declaration of the War on Terror, can be attributed to a tendency to rely on an over-simplified understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism itself. Rather than seeing terrorism as the result of a complex interplay of a variety of economic, historical, political and social psychological forces, Canberra has followed Washington's lead in conceiving terrorism as a largely uni-dimensional problem. In its contemporary context, this means that Canberra sees the threat of terrorism as rooted largely in Islam. This reductionist explanation has been articulated overtly in the rhetoric of Prime Minister Howard himself as well as in the commentaries of senior members of the government and bureaucracy. It is also a recurring theme in official documents that purport to explain the reasoning behind Canberra's counter-terrorism policies. For example, the government's own White Paper setting out Canberra's counter-terrorism policy comments that,

'[w]e find it hard to comprehend the rhetoric of these terrorists, who condemn anyone who does not agree with their approach to Islam. For us, the terrorists' assertions of an international conspiracy to repress and defeat Islam makes no sense. It has no connection to everyday reality, however much we understand and sympathise with the plight of Muslim and other communities in distress. We cannot easily relate their assertions to a territorial dispute, political ideology or historical injustice.'²

The regularity with which Canberra equates terrorism with Islam as a religion belies Howard's regular claims that Canberra respects Islam and that its participation in the US-led War on Terror should not be read as indicative of any hostility towards Islam as a religion or to Muslims as a people. Indeed, the credibility problems that have dogged President Bush throughout the Muslim world are replicated by Howard, albeit on a substantially smaller scale.

This credibility problem is reinforced by Canberra's steadfast refusal to acknowledge the existence of root causes of terrorism. For Howard, like Bush, terrorism springs from the human capacity for jealousy and evil. It is a metaphysical phenomenon rather than a form of human agency rooted in real human experience. This oversimplified analysis is also articulated clearly in the Australian government's White Paper, which explains terrorist

² Commonwealth of Australia, *Transnational Terrorism and the Threat to Australia*, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 2004, p. 2.

behaviour in the following terms,

‘[t]hey [the terrorists] feel threatened by our values and the place we take in the world. Our international alliances and our robust foreign policy are opportunistically invoked in the name of their ‘war’. Our conspicuous example of economic and social prosperity is deemed a threat to their cause. We hear our values and social fabric attacked.’³

To some extent the naiveté of the Australian government’s approach to counter-terrorism can be explained by Australia’s fortunate status as a country that has had little direct experience of such violence. Apart from a handful of very small scale and amateurish attacks against Yugoslav and Turkish diplomatic facilities by disgruntled émigrés in the 1970s, and the accidental deaths of several young Australians in Europe as a result of actions by the IRA, until recently Australia has not had a direct experience of terrorism. As a middle power geographically isolated from most of the world’s trouble spots, terrorism for most Australians has always loomed as a distant and alien phenomenon.

The complacency generated by this lack of familiarity began to change quickly with the attacks of 9/11. By chance, Prime Minister Howard was on a state visit to the United States on the day of the attacks, and witnessed at first hand the physical and psychological damage caused by the terrorists. Soon after his return to Australia Howard called a federal election, and in the campaign national security figured as a core election theme.

However, it was the attacks against two nightclubs on the Indonesian resort island of Bali on 12 October 2002 by the al-Qaeda-linked *Jemaah Islamiyah* that confirmed terrorism’s place at the centre of contemporary Australian politics. The attacks, which killed over 200 people including 88 Australians, were Australia’s first direct experience with mass-casualty terrorism. Despite testimony from the ring-leaders of the terrorist attacks that they were targeting Westerners in general, a popular misperception in Australia is that the attacks were a deliberate strike against Australians. The government has not worked to disabuse Australians of this perception, perhaps because since this attack Australia’s profile as a terrorist target in Southeast Asia has risen dramatically. Unlike the Bali attacks of 2002, a number of subsequent terrorist strikes in Indonesia have been directly aimed at Australian interests. Of particular note was a truck bombing against the Australian embassy in Jakarta on 9 September 2004, which killed eleven Indonesians but no Australians.

In response to these developments the Australian government has adopted a two-tiered approach to counter-terrorism.

At the international level, Canberra is committed to the idea that international terrorism can be combated mainly through a policy regimen within which the use of conventional military power against states that harbour or sponsor terrorism is given high priority. It is for this reason that even though the Howard government pays lip service to the United Nations and other multilateral initiatives designed to develop a coordinated global response to the threat of terrorism, most of its energy has been directed at rejuvenating Australia’s military alliance with the United States.

³ Ibid, p. xi.

It is within this context that Canberra was a key conspirator in the bogus Weapons of Mass Destruction campaign that preceded the US-led invasion of Iraq and in which Australia was a willing participant. Almost two years after the invasion, Australia still has a large military presence in that country. An example of the Howard government's passionate embrace of US policy on Iraq was evinced by comments made by Australia's foreign minister Alexander Downer, who harshly criticised the decision of the newly elected Zapatero government to withdraw Spanish forces from Iraq in the wake of the tragic terrorist bombings of 11 March. Despite the embarrassment caused by the comments, which many Australians regarded as insensitive, boorish and embarrassing, Downer again leapt to Washington's defence when he criticised a similar decision by the Philippines government to withdraw its tiny contingent from Iraq less than 30 days ahead of schedule as part of a deal to save the life of a Filipino father of eight being held by Iraqi insurgents. Australia has also lent diplomatic support to the US in Washington's diplomatic efforts against Syria and Iran and it remains a strong supporter of Israel and Tel Aviv's approach to combating terrorism within Israel.

Consistent with its unwavering support for the Bush administration's belief that the best antidote to terrorist violence is a dose of US-style liberal democracy, delivered by force if necessary, Canberra has also boosted its military budget on the (highly contentious) assertion that sharpening Australia's capacity to project its military power into the immediate Southeast Asian region, but also the world more generally, alongside the United States is critical to the long term ability to counter the threat posed by terrorism.

But this strategy has not been without its diplomatic problems. These were particularly acute in late 2002 when Howard responded to a journalist's question by refusing to rule out the possibility that Australia would consider a pre-emptive military strike against a neighbouring country if it was judged that the country concerned had failed to prevent terrorist attacks against Australian interests. But Howard quickly realised that replicating the Bush administration's doctrine of pre-emption is a strategy fraught with difficulty, especially for a country of Australia's limited influence in regional affairs. The reaction against Howard's comments in Southeast Asia shocked Canberra and since then the prime minister has gently retreated from this position to adopt a more conciliatory and cooperative posture on counter-terrorism cooperation with Australia's neighbours.⁴

This conciliatory approach has been operationalised mainly through a significant expansion in Australia's intelligence cooperation with Southeast Asian states. Without exception, Australia's intelligence relationships with its neighbours have never been close. Beneath the predictable diplomatic bonhomie, Australia has always been more comfortable with its traditional Western allies in the United States and Great Britain than with its neighbours. Despite the gradual development of regularised intelligence exchanges between key Australian agencies and their Southeast Asian counterparts, the quality of raw intelligence as well as intelligence analysis exchanged between the parties was generally of a low level. There are several reasons for this, the most significant of which is that Australia has not considered its counterpart agencies capable of producing high-quality material unsullied by political biases. Meanwhile, for Southeast Asians, Australia was seen mostly as a peripheral player with an inflated sense of its own importance and influence in the region and which offered only repackaged versions of information imparted by Washington.

⁴ See Mohamad Mova Al Afghani, 'Spread of "Preemptive-ism" and Indonesia Sovereignty', *Jakarta Post*, 7 October 2004.

All this has changed in recent years, with Canberra signing a series of bilateral counter-terrorism agreements with Southeast Asian governments that include more extensive and frequent exchanges of intelligence as well as the development of a series of Australian-funded training initiatives delivered by Australian security agencies and designed to boost the counter-terrorism capabilities of their Southeast Asian counterparts.⁵

It is difficult to judge with any degree of certainty the extent to which Australian assistance has played a role in any of the recent counter-terrorism successes in Southeast Asia. At the very least, assistance in the area of forensic investigation delivered by Australian police to their counterparts in Indonesia has played a role in the successful arrest and detention of several key members of terrorist groups involved in the attacks outside the Australian embassy in Jakarta and in a second but less deadly series of attacks in Bali that occurred on 1 October 2005.

But it is also true that such assistance has done little to stem the appeal of the terrorist message in Southeast Asia. In particular, Australia's assistance has done little to stymie Southeast Asian terrorist groups' regenerative abilities. Recent times have provided ample evidence that groups such as *Jemaah Islamiyah* can still easily replenish their membership base, adapt and adjust their orders of battle to accommodate losses in key personnel, and recalibrate their targeting protocols to circumvent tighter security and surveillance techniques. There is sufficient evidence to mount a persuasive argument that Australia's counter-terrorism policies at the international level remain overwhelmingly reactive in character; addressing symptoms rather than causes. It is also clear, although Canberra steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the fact, that its high-profile support for the Bush administration's War on Terror, and especially for its military misadventure in Iraq, has led to a situation whereby anger with the US is deflected onto Australia. In much of Southeast Asia, Australia serves as a surrogate target for anti-American sentiment in particular, but anti-Westernism more generally.

Canberra's dogmatic refusal to acknowledge this fact, and its rejection of the possibility that such sentiment might be rooted in attitudinal dynamics deeply rooted in a complex mixture of real and perceived social and political grievances, means that Australia's international contribution to countering terrorism will remain limited.

The second tier of Australia's approach has been a strengthening of domestic counter-terrorism laws. These reforms have occurred in several waves, each following high-profile terrorist attacks overseas. This pattern of an incremental hardening of the state's coercive powers is important, because it underscores the reactive character of the Howard government's approach to counter-terrorism. Lacking a long-term terrorism management strategy, itself a reflection of Canberra's failure to understand the complexity of the problem we confront, domestic counter-terrorism law reform has been piecemeal with each tranche of legislative changes introduced in the confusing post attack atmospheres that followed 9/11, the Bali bombings, the Madrid attacks and, most recently, the attacks in July 2005 against the London public transport system.

⁵ See 'Counter-Terrorism: Regional Coordination and Cooperation', *Speech to National Security Australia 2004 Conference by Mr Les Luck, Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Sydney, 23 March 2004*. Available at http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/speeches/department/040323_nsc_amb_cntterr.html (accessed 1 May 2004).

There is not the space here to document in detail the complex nature of these reforms, suffice to point out that most have focused on enhancing the counter-terrorism powers of the domestic intelligence agency, the Australian Secret Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), and those of the Australian Federal Police (AFP).⁶ Until 9/11, neither of these agencies had any significant experience in dealing with terrorism, although as a part of its obligations in the lead up to the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games ASIO acquired substantially more experience than the AFP. Even so, it is these two agencies that have benefited most from the legislative reforms, with each being given substantial increases in their annual budgets as well as an extensive array of investigative as well as arrest and detention powers which have been criticised by civil rights groups and the legal profession as constituting an assault on fundamental principles of human rights.⁷

At another level, the Howard government has invested substantial resources in its 'Terrorist Hotline', a toll-free telephone service, supported by widespread media advertising, that encourages ordinary Australian's to monitor the activities of fellow citizens and report any suspicious activities. It is not clear how ordinary Australians can do what trained intelligence officers often cannot – identify a terrorist on a bus, train or in a market–, but this has not stopped more than 64,000 vigilant Australians from using the service. Most of these have reported on the activities of law-abiding Muslims going about their everyday business.

In particular, the disproportionate use of these enhanced powers of surveillance and interrogation against Australia's relatively small Muslim population (approximately 300,000 people out of a total national population of around 20 million, or 1.5% of the total population) has begun to undermine Australia's otherwise harmonious experience as a diverse and affluent multicultural society. Social tensions generated by basic law and order problems in some Australian cities, notably Sydney, are now infused with a national security sub-text.

There is a real risk that the current mix of community suspicion and enhanced surveillance and interrogation powers risks driving otherwise law-abiding citizens to seek protection by retreating into isolated cultural and religious enclaves. We know from the Western European experience that such a sense of cultural alienation from the wider community creates an ideal environment within which individual terrorist cell members can hide. Without fellow community members knowing or approving of their activities, individual terrorists often secrete themselves within such communities, using a general suspicion of the authorities as an extra level of security behind which they can go about their business, which is more often non-violent than violent activity: money laundering, equipment procurement, press monitoring and, occasionally, talent spotting.

The importance of multiculturalism as a weapon in Australia's counter-terrorism arsenal is under-appreciated by the federal government. Several members of the government, supported by elements within the tabloid media, have continued to insist that the threat to Australia lies within Islam and that Australian Muslims need to evince deeper levels of conformity with mainstream (read: non-Muslim) values. Tensions and the growing sense

⁶ For a chronological summary of Australia's domestic counter terrorism legislation see Parliament of Australia Library, 'Terrorism Chronology', at <http://www.afp.gov.au/library/intguide/law/terrorism.htm>

⁷ For a fuller discussion of these details see Jenny Hocking, 'Counter-Terrorism and the Criminalisation of Politics: Australia's New Security Powers of Detention, Proscription and Control', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 49, nr 3, 2003, p. 355-371.

of marginalisation among Australia's Muslim community were exacerbated in early November 2005 when a joint counter-terrorism operation involving federal and state police forces in New South Wales and Victoria led to the arrest of a network of Australians of mostly Lebanese background for allegedly plotting Madrid-style terrorist attacks in Australia's two largest cities of Melbourne and Sydney.

Lost amidst much of the hysteria surrounding these arrests was the fact that they would not have been possible without members of Australia's Muslim population volunteering the information that first alerted police to the plot. In this case, and others, it is not the enhanced arsenal of police and intelligence powers that have led to domestic counter-terrorism successes in Australia; it has been the goodwill and civic-mindedness of the country's small Muslim community.

Conclusions: Australia has moved quickly to address the threat posed by trans-national terrorism, and in some respects it has initiated some important and useful reforms. Especially important have been steps to better coordinate counter-terrorism cooperation between federal policing and intelligence agencies and corresponding bodies within Australia's six states and two federal territories. Also important have been initiatives designed to expand intelligence cooperation with Southeast Asian states, as well as programmes sponsored by the Australian government to develop the counter-terrorism skills of regional intelligence and policing services.

But belying the effectiveness of these initiatives is a range of interpretive problems deeply embedded within the cultural prejudices of the federal government. The Howard government's instinctive conservatism, epitomised most obviously by its vocal support for the Bush administration's global War on Terror, has contributed to an escalation of Australia's profile as a potential target for terrorist attacks, mainly in Southeast Asia but quite possibility also among disenfranchised young militants at home. At the same time, the benefits for domestic counter-terrorism agencies delivered by having cohesive and well-integrated multicultural communities is being undermined by a dangerous mix of political opportunism and hysterical media coverage, both of which are contributing to ethnic and cultural tensions.

Australia will continue to secure minor counter-terrorism successes, both at home and in cooperation with foreign agencies in Southeast Asia. But its current policy mix is unable to address the deeper dynamics that are driving growing hostility to Australia within militant and terrorist circles. As a result, for the foreseeable future the counter-terrorism challenge facing Australia will continue to grow.