



SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY the Beacon

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PANDEMIC, PRIVATISATION AND POINT SCORING

During this horrific pandemic, political point scoring has continued to be a feature of politics, resulting from the determination of politicians to either stay in power or obtain power. In Australia, this point scoring, sometimes covert and more often overt, has become the fodder for private media outlets, and particularly the Murdoch empire, to exploit.

While lip service has been given to 'cooperation' between state and federal governments, and some aspects of working together have been noted in the beginning of the pandemic, it didn't take long for the political blame game to emerge.

Repeated claims that Australia was ready and prepared for a pandemic that governments had long been warned about was simply not so and this failure became clearly apparent with the lack of proper resources for medical, nursing and orderly staff in our hospitals, resulting in our frontline staff becoming vulnerable to the virus. Conflicting directives and questionable decisions, a reliance on politicians' rationalisations rather than health experts' advice, all contributed to serious errors with devastating results.

Even more alarming has been the situation facing the elderly, particularly those in 'private for profit' nursing homes. The standard of healthcare in these for-profit facilities was acutely bad even before the pandemic, but news has emerged that exposes the failure of the federal government to protect those living in privately run facilities. It is estimated that the government spends 18 billion dollars subsidising private healthcare with little or no accountability for how this money is spent – certainly not for benefitting the residents!

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety report condemns the private-run system as unsafe and reveals shocking tales of long-term neglect. The pandemic has exposed even more deficiencies.

There are almost 800 aged care facilities in Victoria, and of these, over 600 are privately run and regulated by the Commonwealth; only 178 are run by the Victorian Government. About 10 per cent of all aged care beds in the state are publicly owned. It is surely obvious to everyone that private, for-profit facilities cut corners to increase profit

and this is what has happened under the Federal Government's watch, resulting in the appalling conditions being exposed by the royal commission.

What this pandemic has clearly established is the failure of privatisation, of the need for transparency from all sectors of government, for genuine cooperation and coordination based on the facts. Privatisation has benefitted large national and overseas corporations and has deprived the people of basic services at affordable prices in order for these corporations to increase their massive profits.

More importantly, the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for an end to neoliberalism, for our independence from other countries and their policies and for a system that works for the majority and not simply for maintaining 'the economy', which serves a minority. When governments bemoan the pandemic affecting the economy, they do not mean an economy that serves the majority – because it never has. Pre-pandemic problems expose the truth of that.

What the pandemic has exposed worldwide is the unacceptable lack of affordable healthcare for working people and their families. It has exposed the failure of governments to implement policies and strategies to meet the needs of their people, for a living wage, for jobs, for housing, for security. It has exposed the huge profits that are privately appropriated and not used to meet the needs of the people.

Prior to the pandemic, job security, affordable housing, social services, affordable energy, and union rights were decreasing, and there were no proposals from governments about resolving these urgent issues. Indeed, the unemployment benefit for those struggling to find work was known to be well below the poverty line and disregarded by those in power. Homelessness was rampant and union rights under savage attack.

Post pandemic we have a choice: we can go back to that extreme exploitation of our living and democratic rights and dignity or we can demand a new deal. ☪

EDITORIAL

It's time to strip 'national security' of its sacred cow status

PART 2

On closer inspection, the immense financial, institutional, and rhetorical investment in this elaborate security edifice rests on questionable assumptions. The costs may far outweigh any likely benefits.

Part 1 described Australia's greatly expanded security apparatus and the concerted efforts to create a narrative that uses Australia's past sacrifices in war to validate this trend.

The planned growth of ADF capabilities is locking Australia more and more firmly into America's military-industrial complex. This is the inevitable result of our current military procurement plans, strategic doctrine, training practices, combined operations and active support for US military bases and communications and surveillance systems.

Wittingly or otherwise we are choosing a path whereby America's wars become our wars. Our hosting of the Pine Gap and North West Cape facilities is a case in point. We enter into these arrangements expecting, or perhaps just hoping, that US military support will be forthcoming in the event of a direct threat to Australia's security.

As Richard Tanter has pointed out in fine detail, we do this knowing that these facilities support US nuclear-war targeting, US extrajudicial counterterrorism

killings, US plans for space warfare, not to mention US operations in highly volatile conflict zones, notably Afghanistan, Iraq, the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea.

How to explain the strange reasoning behind these choices? Part of the answer is that our political, bureaucratic, military and intelligence elites remain addicted to the military power associated with imperial centres. They see themselves as having privileged access to an exclusive and powerful club – once the British club, now the American club. They may have grasped the demise of the former but find it difficult to accept the slow but steady decline of the latter.

There is another important part to this story. It has to do with Australia's longstanding fixation on threats. The sources of threat are usually said to be external. With the end of the Cold War, the Islamist and Chinese threats gradually replaced the Soviet threat. But foreign influences can also infiltrate and pose a danger from within. Not surprisingly, Jihadist elements and China sympathisers inside Australia have become integral to this narrative.

Obsessive threat perception merits close attention, for unchecked it becomes a potent force fanning the flames of militarism and escalating tensions in already troubled waters.

After September 2001, successive Australian governments have used the terrorist threat as the primary justification for an ever-larger security apparatus endowed with vastly expanded powers and resources.

Between 2001 and 2010, ASIO experienced a threefold increase in its staff numbers and a sixfold increase in its budget. Its total budget currently stands at \$573 million (up from \$352 million in 2009–10). Over the same ten-year period, the AFP budget has risen from \$1.1 billion to \$1.8 billion, and the ASIS budget from \$202 million to \$586 million.

Increased financial resourcing has been accompanied by innumerable new pieces of legislation and a long list of related measures. Several groups have been designated as terrorist organisations, passports have been cancelled or suspended, and steps taken to deny actual or potential terrorist cells access to financing. Other measures have included preventive detention orders, raids on homes and other premises, interrogation warrants, and detention and control orders.

Yet, Australia has experienced relatively few terrorist attacks on its soil since 2011, with less than thirty deaths resulting from such attacks. As a point of comparison, the same period has witnessed many more Indigenous deaths in custody (well over 400 since 2008), and many more women have died as a result of domestic violence (the current annual average is over 50).

Even allowing for the 2002 Bali bombings, it would be fair to say that Australia's legislative, institutional, financial and psychological response has exceeded that of virtually any other country of comparable size and level of threat exposure.

Mirroring and reinforcing Australia's sweeping domestic agenda has been its active regional involvement in countering Salafist-Jihadist movements, especially in Indonesia and the Philippines. To this we should add the string of military deployments and training programs that have taken Australia to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, as well as its active support for a range of other global counterterrorist initiatives.

Simply put, the terrorist threat became central to the entire architecture of Australia's domestic and foreign policies. The formulation and execution of Australia's counter-terrorist agenda fitted nicely with its longstanding preoccupation with external threats of non-Western provenance.

The agenda was all the more appealing in that it dovetailed neatly with Western, to wit American, interests and perceptions. The curtailment of civil liberties and more generally the democratic deficit that became integral to the war on terror became part of the price that had to be paid in the interests of 'national security'.

In many ways, the China threat scenario serves a similar purpose. As previously argued, despite its remarkable economic rise, China's capacity to project military muscle pales in comparison with America's global military reach.

The possibility, however distant, that the Chinese navy may gain access to port or basing facilities in the Indo-Pacific region, is enough to raise eyebrows and provoke deep consternation. The fact that the United States, 30 years after the end of the Cold War, still has some 800 bases in foreign countries is regarded as normal.

The same holds for China's efforts to establish links with Australian institutions and political, business and community leaders. These have become the source of unrelenting suspicion and dismay. By contrast, the longstanding networks of influence which the United States, Britain or Israel have developed across Australia's political, military and intelligence landscape are viewed with relative equanimity.

For over a year now, Australia's intelligence agencies have been issuing dire warnings about China's 'political influence activities'. All kinds of allegations – in some cases little more than rumours or speculation – have been making the rounds.

A case in point were the allegations last year of unprecedented levels of foreign (meaning Chinese) interference in Australian universities. A year later, little of substance has come to light. The agreements regarding the governance of Confucius Institutes have been marginally tightened in the wake of media frenzy, but no evidence of undue influence has been produced.

The government-driven University Foreign Interference Taskforce, which released its report in November last year, issued a series of non-prescriptive guidelines, but made no attempt to measure or substantiate claims of foreign interference in university research and education programs.

When appearing before the Senate Estimates Committee in October last year, ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess, referred again to unacceptable levels of foreign interference, but gave no details of the nature, actual scope or source of the threat.

The pattern is now well established. When pressed on the lack of evidence in support of this or that claim, the government and the security apparatus that advises it invariably invoke national security as justification for the deafening silence.

Though it is too early to tell what the outcome will be, the recent raids on the homes of NSW Labor MP Shaoquett Moselmane and his staffer John Zhang have been shrouded in secrecy. Undisclosed sources have indicated that they are part of a wide-ranging investigation into alleged Chinese government attempts to influence a serving politician.

But critical questions are studiously ignored. Is the raid just a fishing expedition or does it rest on solid evidence? What constitutes undue or unacceptable influence? Who sets the relevant criteria? Should the investigation find that the member of parliament has not done anything illegal, when and how will he be recompensed for the prejudicial effect of the investigation on his reputation and membership of the parliament?

In any case, the consequences go far beyond the impact on any one individual. They could seriously impact the already fragile Australia-China relationship. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has already reacted by accusing Australia of extensive espionage activities and of 'peddling rumours and stoking confrontation'. Tellingly, the Chinese statement referred to the cyber espionage, spying and surveillance activities of the Five Eyes Intelligence alliance that links Australia, the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand.

Beijing has offered no evidence to support its accusations. But one thing is clear. The tit-for-tat exchanges between Beijing and Canberra are worryingly reminiscent of the toxic atmosphere between the two superpowers at the height of the Cold War and the steady militarisation of their respective societies.

The question is whether the Chinese and Australian governments have the presence of mind to renew the dialogue sufficiently to be able to put their respective concerns on the table and take remedial action before it is too late.

Notions of national security that place the accent on armed force and coercion seem ill-suited to the needs of the moment. It may be time to construct a new narrative that sees the power and civilisation shift now under way not as a threat but an opportunity to create a more cooperative international order attuned to the needs of people and the planet. 🕊

UK shoots self in foot for Uncle Sam

BY FINIAN CUNNINGHAM

16 JULY 2020 'INFORMATION CLEARING HOUSE'

In a dramatic U-turn, the British government is scrapping Chinese telecom giant Huawei's involvement in modernising its internet infrastructure. And the Trump White House is crowing with glee.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hailed London's decision as 'protecting free-world values'. What values might they be? Bullying, intimidation, subservience, empire building?

The Trump administration has been piling pressure on the British to back away from earlier plans to partner with Huawei for developing its 5G wireless network. American sanctions and a media campaign vilifying Chinese technology as a national security threat seems to have won the day.

Boris Johnson's government overturned its previous decision in January to partner with Huawei. British telecom operators have now been ordered to stop using Huawei's technology and to rip out existing 5G equipment over a seven-year period.

The British government admits that this reversal will result in delays for modernising the country's telecoms services – seen as vital for economic development – and will add huge costs of up to £2 billion (\$2.5 bn) for eventual replacement. Something which taxpayers and consumers will no doubt have to pay for.

So much for the much-vaunted Anglo-American 'special relationship'. It's special alright. Uncle Sam calls the shots – and Britain shoots itself in the foot.

It should be obvious that the whole debacle has nothing to do with alleged 'national security concerns' and everything to do with Washington strong-arming for commercial and strategic advantage.

Huawei, the world's largest telecoms equipment maker, is supplanting American technology across the world. And Washington is endeavouring to blacklist the company in order to give its own firms a competitive advantage. The Trump administration has accused Huawei – without evidence – of offering a backdoor to the 'Chinese Communist Party' for global surveillance.

It takes a lot of brass neck for the Americans to punt that particular line given the actual global spying that its tech giants have enabled the US-based National Security Agency to conduct, as revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden.

The battle over technology and commerce is only part of the bigger strategic struggle which Washington views as vital to sustaining its presumed global power.

American capitalism and power view the world as a zero-sum contest. All perceived competitors must be vanquished or controlled so that American power can prevail as an all-dominant entity.

To that end, Washington must necessarily portray the world in polarising Cold War terms of 'us against them', or of so-called 'allies against enemies'.

As Chinese and Russian diplomats have repeatedly pointed out, Washington seems incapable of shedding its Cold War ideology of 'containment' and 'great power rivalry'. For American capitalism, the idea of mutual partnership and cooperation is simply and utterly anathema.

The fight with China over the telecoms industry is just one front among many others in America's wider strategic conflict against Beijing.

Washington needs to kill the competition with draconian interventions, either with propaganda, sanctions or arm-twisting. Because the bigger picture is about subjugating others to accept Washington's political, economic and military diktat.

China and Russia are not amenable about that designated subordinate role desired by Washington. Hence the Cold War revival and indeed intensification. Ultimately, war is the potential endpoint.

In classic zero-sum mode, Washington is demanding that its ostensible allies in Europe must shun Chinese telecoms and Chinese commerce in general. The same applies to trade with Russia as exemplified by America's bullying over the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

It is no coincidence that as Britain was set to announce its 'decision' (that is, Washington's decision) on Huawei, Trump's national security adviser Robert O'Brien was lobbying other European governments to likewise ditch plans to partner with the Chinese firm for 5G development.

Germany, France, Spain and Sweden, among other EU members, appear to be moving ahead with their Huawei partnership plans. They have so far rebuffed Washington's alleged fears over national security.

Not so Britain and other members of the US-led Five Eyes nations: Australia, New Zealand and Canada. They, not surprisingly, appear to have swallowed the 'national security' propaganda and anti-China bigotry with gusto.

Indeed, so subservient is Britain to Washington, the government in London seems willing to damage its own economy and the wellbeing of its own people in order to suck up a little favour from Uncle Sam.

The 'free world'? Yeah, freedom to be a vassal. 🇺🇸

Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in newspaper journalism. He is also a musician and songwriter. For nearly 20 years, he worked as an editor and writer in major news media organisations, including *The Mirror*, *Irish Times* and *Independent*.



In late January I departed Melbourne, beginning the long, arduous journey to the Caribbean, to take part in a program called CASA Cuba, an academic exchange program that gave me the immense privilege to study at two of the most prestigious Latin American research institutions in the world – the University of Havana, and the Casa de Las Americas, both cultural and academic powerhouses in the region. I was the sole Australian to take part in the exchange – the rest of the students came from various US cities, and two from Ireland.

How glad I was to finally arrive at Jose Marti International Airport, the calm waters of the Caribbean and lush tropical interior of the island visible as we began our descent. My first week in Cuba was a whirlwind of nonstop orientation activities and tours around the city, where I was able to refamiliarise myself with the main districts of the city: Vedado, a modern residential neighbourhood and home to cultural and political institutions; Centro Habana, location of the majestic government building, el capitolio, and a bustling district replete with theatres, parks and hotels; Old Havana, the meticulously restored Spanish colonial part of the city, brimming with museums, stunning churches, as well as a range of other tourist attractions; and Miramar, a neighbourhood in Havana's west renowned as the domain of foreign diplomats.

Prior to arriving, I had read much on Cuba's current situation, and how it had changed since my last two visits – with the tightening of US sanctions on both Cuba and its chief ally Venezuela, Cuba was facing economic difficulties. Fuel shortages were indeed far more widespread across the island, with issues relating to food distribution and public transport. Through government efforts to mitigate the damage caused by the United States, everyone was still

receiving enough food, and all workers, students and other civilians got from point A to point B, one way or another. That Cuban resourcefulness always comes through. In other aspects I found that Cuba had well and truly advanced – a series of new industrialisation projects in Havana's east had begun in a bid to diversify the economy, while tourism had continued to grow, albeit at a slower pace due to US travel bans placed on the island. Evidence of Russian and Chinese aid was apparent with many more building restorations in the city and a range of new services, from shopping centres to public transportation options and the building of roads. It was reassuring to see that, while the squeeze of the blockade was definitely impacting on Cuban life, the island hasn't been abandoned by its friends and allies.

My host family represented a true gamut of Cuban history and contemporary life, with no less than four generations living under the one roof. The eldest man, Anibal, had fought with Fidel Castro in the revolution and had founded the Cuban Socialist Party branch in one of the central provinces of the island. I was often engrossed in conversation with him, where he would regale me with stories of his meetings with Fidel, Che, Raul and Celia Sanchez, all Cuban icons, as well as his time serving on internationalist missions in Angola, the Congo and Madagascar. My host grandmother, Nina, was from the ex-Soviet Union, and had come to Cuba in the 1980s to teach Russian at the University of Havana. With the terrible collapse of socialism in eastern Europe and Russia, she opted to stay in Cuba. Her daughter, Ana, ran the house as a casa particular, a type of homestay accommodation which is one of the small business options available to Cubans on the island. And Ana's husband was a recognised religious leader for one of the island's Afro-Cuban faiths. There was truly no better family

with which to immerse myself in Cuban life and learn about the diverse influences that have shaped the Cuban reality.

I found my studies in Cuba thoroughly engaging. My Cuban history class was taken by the president of the Cuban Office of the Historian, responsible for a range of prestigious academic publications and the restoration of Old Havana. Cuban history is taught as a historical process of popular resistance and revolution – beginning with the indigenous uprising of Hatuey against the Spanish, through the two Cuban independence wars, the revolution of 1959 and into the present as the socialist revolution continues its path forward. Viewing history in such a holistic way was refreshing considering the haphazard, incomplete way I have found our own Australian history to be taught. Another of my classes was taken by a Cuban health professor with an esteemed position in the Ministry of Public Health. During these classes, I was given the privilege of visiting Cuban healthcare institutions. I visited a Cuban hospital and mental health clinic, both of which count on incorporating highly effective preventative practice, collaborative therapy and personalised family doctor visits.

I visited a maternity residence for pregnant women with social and economic issues, and a day centre for the elderly to socialise, get a full three-meal feed and join excursions. All this only confirmed the wholistic, multidisciplinary approach taken by Cuba in its public health system, where social and economic factors are considered to be just as significant as the medical. All of these services are of course free, and integral to the island's socialist system. By far one of the highlights of this subject was the chance to visit ELAM, the Latin American School of Medicine where students from disadvantaged communities around the world have the opportunity to study medicine with all costs paid by the Cuban government. Students from Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands and impoverished parts of Europe and the US are able to benefit from this truly world class facility. ELAM is an icon of Cuba's internationalist spirit, in which human decency and a genuine desire to help others overrides the desire to profit. My third and final subject was taken by an expert in African and Middle Eastern history. I learned an immense amount about African and Middle Eastern independence struggles and the Cuban role in supporting these movements. This history is unavailable for study at Australian universities.

I must say, Cuba always surprises me with the number of hidden opportunities that can present themselves. I arrived in Havana just in time for their annual International Book Fair, which attracts representatives and distinguished guests from around the world. This year's country of honour was Vietnam. Other countries in attendance ranged from Peru, Venezuela and Costa Rica to Russia and the United Arab Emirates. The Cuban president himself spoke, and Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, former president of Argentina and current vice-president of the nation, introduced her new memoir in person. This event is an important forum of anti-imperialist

resistance and an opportunity to display solidarity with the revolutionary government and other popular movements around the world, but particularly in Latin America. It was here at the book fair that by chance I met an Iranian diplomat to Cuba and was invited to attend an event in recognition of Iran's Islamic revolution, held at the famous Hotel Nacional – sadly, this is another nation whose people suffer at the hands of the US and its criminal sanctions.

While in Cuba I also had the immense privilege of meeting none other than Adan Chavez, brother of Comandante Hugo Chavez, and Venezuelan ambassador to Cuba for several years – an important link between the two revolutionary nations. I was invited to attend an event commemorating the passing of Hugo Chavez, at ICAP, the Cuban Institute of Friendship with People. As many of you know, this organisation coordinates solidarity actions, cultural exchange and friendship between Cuba and other countries. Adan's speech at this event was inspiring. He discussed how the relations between Caracas and Havana had only strengthened as a result of US aggression against the two sovereign states, contrary to its intentions, and highlighted the inability of the US to understand the deep ideological and historical ties that bind Venezuela and Cuba. It is this essential solidarity over the last two decades that has seen Havana walk hand in hand with Bolivarian Venezuela in pursuit of the ideals of internationalist, socialist cooperation.

As part of my official program in Cuba we also travelled to Cienfuegos, a city to the southeast of Havana and close to the infamous Bay of Pigs. Here we met with a local elected member of the Assembly of People's Power. A teacher, the representative, explained the Cuban political system, which is often deliberately distorted abroad. Cuban politics is open to all Cuban civilians regardless of background or position, with a free, anonymous election process. With a range of responsibilities, including ratifying the new president and legislation, the elected delegates of the Assembly of People's Power truly answer to the people – Cubans are able to revoke the position of a delegate if they believe that the delegate is not adequately representing them.

Very sadly, my time in Cuba was cut short by the unprecedented escalation of coronavirus around the world. The Cubans approached the news of daily increases in global coronavirus cases with a healthy dose of optimism. My host family constantly assured us that we would be safe in Cuba – they emphasised, with good reason, that Cuba's healthcare system is truly world class. So comprehensive was the Cuban response to coronavirus that, before they had any cases, I was flooded with daily updates on Cuban preparative measures and the regional situation. My teachers, host family and friends had all received up-to-date information regarding hygiene practices, mask use and social distancing even before the arrival of three infected Italian tourists to the rural town of Trinidad in mid-March. I was very impressed to say the least. The Cuban president, Miguel Diaz-Canel, was televised across the nation speaking with a range of experts and explaining in great detail what

was being done to halt the spread of the virus. I felt incredibly safe in Havana, particularly considering the escalating number of cases and deaths in the United States, which were beginning to skyrocket at that time.

The total coronavirus case count in Cuba had barely reached ten when the program directors announced that our studies had been suspended. I began the journey home three days later, only halfway through my intended stay of fifteen weeks. My biggest concern was potentially having a temperature and then being quarantined at any of the three US airports that I needed to travel through to get home. Luckily, I got home on the last flight out of San Francisco to Brisbane, and then on to Melbourne.

Just days after my return, Cuba sent medical brigades to fight coronavirus in Italy, Argentina and a number of Caribbean islands, so prepared was the nation for what was to come. Since then almost thirty countries around the world have received Cuban medical aid to support the battle with COVID-19. Currently, Cuba is one of the few countries

in the world to have successfully contained the coronavirus. It is now slowly, cautiously, returning to normality, with plans to open isolated tourism opportunities on Cuba's offshore archipelagos, and the continued subsidisation of citizens' wages by the Cuban government. As the infections and deaths continue out of control in many right-wing countries, such as the US and Brazil, suffice to say that Cuba has shone a much-needed light on socialism's successes amidst capitalist failure in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

I must conclude this recount by saying that, from what I saw and experienced, I have every confidence that Cuba will continue to confound the US and defy the illegal sanctions imposed upon it. If anything, the escalation of measures against Cuba's socialist revolution by imperialist powers has only united the populace behind their leaders, and they are determined to further their independent, internationalist and socialist revolution in spite of the difficulties that this entails. And I have no doubt that the Cubans will, as always, come out the other end of this crisis with their heads held high. 🕊

VALE JO MOONEY

Members of the Unitarian Church send their condolences to Ken Mooney on the death of his beloved wife, Jo, on 7 August 2020.

Jo was born in the UK on the outbreak of WW2. She suffered from severe asthma and was only a young girl when the family came out to Australia in the late 1940s after being advised by their doctor to migrate for health reasons. The family settled in Horsham, before moving to Adelaide.

Unable to get work in Adelaide, Jo moved to Melbourne where she first met Ken. She went to university, got a degree and worked as a social worker in various Melbourne hospitals. Ken and Jo married in 1969 and had three sons and a daughter.

The pair devoted their lives to improving the lot of working people and were dedicated trade unionists and socialists. Jo and Ken were long-time members of the Unitarian Church and regularly attended meetings.

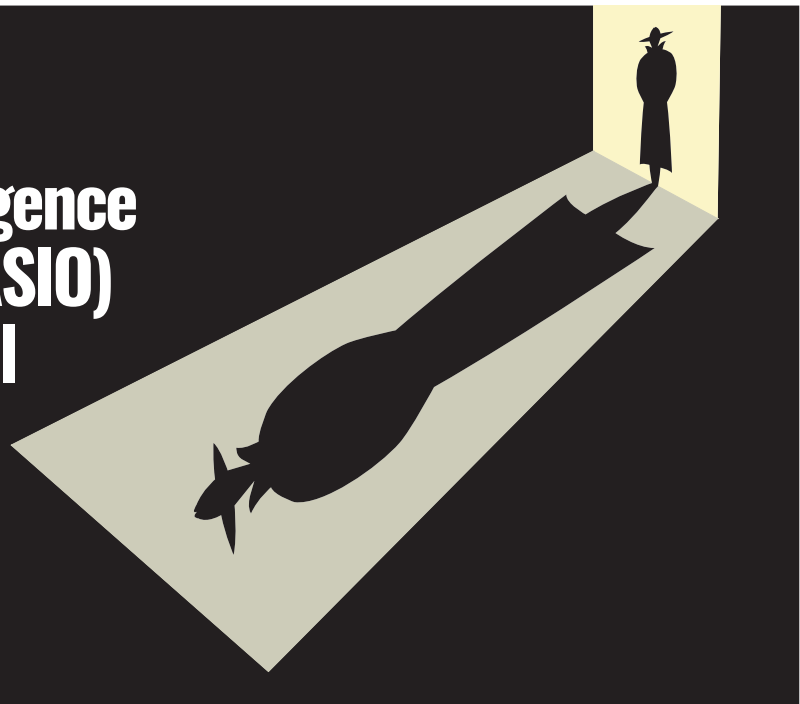
Jo will be missed by her friends and especially by Ken. 'She was always there for me,' he said.

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The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Amendment Bill 2020



Throughout Australia's history succeeding governments, both state and federal, have introduced wide-ranging anti-people, anti-union laws, acts and legislation. Today many Bills are presented as anti-terrorism measures couched in such terms as 'protecting our democracy, freedoms, values and way of life'.

Each successive item of legislation places further restrictions on our democratic rights and freedoms, indeed further eroding the 'rights' they claim to protect. In fact, the potential applications of many of the Bills extend far beyond fighting terrorism and extend to peaceful protests and dissent.

In today's economic crisis, and the serious impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Australia is witnessing further erosion of democratic and social rights.

Internationally, organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund demand massive concessions for loans to sovereign nations that include mandatory austerity programs to freeze wages, sell publicly owned enterprises and cut people's social and healthcare entitlements.

Further, these bodies demand the introduction of wide-ranging legislation that weakens the organisation and political power of trade unions and other people's organisations. Australia is not immune to these developments.

For the Australian people, their trade unions, community organisations and the living standards won from capital over decades of struggle, are under savage attack.

Recent attacks on trade union rights include legislation under the Australian competition and

consumer legislation and the Morrison government's Ensuring Integrity Bill.

This legislation was found by the UN International Labour Organisation (ILO) to repeatedly and unequivocally breach Australia's obligations as a member state and as a signatory to specific conventions.

Another area of concern is the need for increased scrutiny of legislation to the COVID-19 crisis. Prime Minister Scott Morrison is increasingly bypassing Parliament to ensure some measures addressing the coronavirus pandemic are exempt not only from parliamentary votes but also from amendments of any kind.

Most of the Morrison government's COVID-19 measures have been implemented by regulation – this is also known as delegated legislation rather than by full legislation. Using this mechanism, the government does not require the House of Representatives or the Senate to specifically pass them. Parliament's influence over 'delegated legislation' is usually limited to disallowing 'after the fact'.

Of at least 137 new laws made this way since the pandemic was declared, 32 are entirely exempt from 'disallowance'.

Affected legislation includes the Social Security Act, and the Corporations Act relating to the power to change welfare benefits and arrangements for business. Although the clauses are temporary, the Federal Government has given itself the authority to extend them six months beyond their extended sunset date.

The growing power of these clauses further expands the growing practice of successive governments of bypassing parliamentary scrutiny to make laws that are not subject to any kind of vote.

Even the Federal Government's 'Bills Committee' has raised the question of the use of these so-called clauses that the High Court of Australia has suggested may undermine Parliament's constitutional role.

It is worth recording that eminent lawyers, including Sydney University's Professor Anne Twomey, and University of NSW Professor Gabrielle Appleby and Professor George Williams, have noted that some other delegated legislation may also be unconstitutional.

The practice of using the COVID-19 crisis to bypass Parliament is simply extending the practice and adding to the arsenal of more than 75 pieces of anti-democratic legislation dating back to the days of the Howard government.

In the current political and social environment, it is simply far too easy for our politicians at all levels of government to make executive decisions on our behalf without proper consultation and the democratic scrutiny of those decisions. We must be prepared to initiate action and undertake activities to expose any legislation that infringes on personal freedoms and human rights.

Further, in relation to the ASIO Amendment Bill, strong objections have been raised by the Law Council of Australia, who believe Australian's personal freedoms could be under serious threat with this Bill.

The Australian Lawyer's Alliance has presented the ASIO changes as a step towards a totalitarian state. Daniel Hurst, of the *Guardian*, argued that ASIO could question children and more easily use tracking devices under new powers.

The Green's Senator Nick McKim said, 'The national terrorism threat in Australia has not increased for more than five years and yet we have been confronted with wave after wave of legislation. He also said that 'Minister Dutton, responsible for the Bill, had failed to justify interrogating children as young as 14 years of age'.

This Bill was introduced into the House of Representatives on 13 May 2020. Some of the worst features of the Bill are as follows:

- **ASIO would be allowed to question children as young as 14 years of age.**
- **ASIO will have easier access to tracking devices.**
- **The Bill would also extend the power of ASIO to people over 'foreign interference'. The Attorney-General would be able to issue certain warrants orally in emergency situations.**
- **The Bill proposes expansion of the powers of search and seizure to ASIO in connection with questioning warrants. These include the power of personal search and seizure in relation to people subject to questioning warrants and the power to search premises.**

- **The Bill allows for the expansion of ASIO powers to use surveillance and tracking devices without an external warrant or a warrant in some circumstances without external authority. This places human rights at serious risk.**
- **The Bill will impinge on the rights of lawyers and their clients and will reduce independent scrutiny of ASIO surveillance activities.**
- **The Bill's power is so sweeping that it allows for hearsay evidence to be used. This means that all ASIO would have to do is to tell the prescribed authority, which could be a judge or Administrative Appeals member that they have heard from 'sources' that the lawyer requested by the detainee is a security risk.**
- **The Bill appears to give ASIO warrantless powers to plant surveillance devices approved by another ASIO officer.**
- **The Bill proposes limitations on a person's right to have a lawyer of their choice present during questioning and allows for the ability to remove a lawyer from questioning sessions.**

There is grave concern that the government was unduly rushing the Bill and that the community has been given insufficient time to scrutinise the proposed laws, which from a lay person's viewpoint, are lengthy, complex and highly intrusive of individual rights.

Organisations in the community, such as the Philippines Australian Solidarity Association, our own Unitarian church, lawyers' associations and human rights associations, firmly believe that the proposed changes to the ASIO legislation pose a very serious threat to the personal freedoms and democratic rights of Australians and are calling on the Federal Government to immediately withdraw the ASIO Amendment Bill 2020 currently before the House of Representatives.

Finally, the question must be asked – What can we do about the ASIO Security Intelligence Bill?

People can send individual letters outlining their concerns regarding the impact of the Bill to Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Federal Opposition leader Anthony Albanese. The matter can be raised at the various organisations of which we are members, and where possible, a decision adopted opposing the Bill and forwarded to the relevant member of parliament.

Articles of concern can be prepared for inclusion in community newsletters, Facebook, other social media and any other areas considered appropriate, such as Radio 3CR, talkback radio and letters to the editor of various newspapers. We need to learn the lessons of history when democratic rights were savagely eroded, and unchallenged, led to a world war. 🕊

A labour market for hard times

BY RALPH CATTS

In recent weeks we have learnt that, in Victoria, security guards for the quarantine hotels in Melbourne were hired on a casual basis using social media. It is suggested that they received little or no training, and that supervision was lax. The result was an outbreak of COVID-19 infections that impacted upon the workers, their families and friends, and the wider community. The security staff were employed on 'casual' contracts, which meant that they had no sick leave entitlement, so some came to work when showing symptoms and passed the disease to colleagues and to some of the people in quarantine! They also transmitted the disease to their families and the wider community.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted especially in aged care facilities, where many employees have little or no training, and receive no sick leave, which means they come to work in multiple care homes when sick, and consequently kill vulnerable older people.

What is common in these two situations is a casual workforce with poor conditions of employment.

Why is there little or no criticism of these poor employment practices that seem to be the cause of the failings in the security services, and also in the aged care providers? These examples show that the so-called 'flexible' labour market lacks resilience when things get tough. When challenged, the Minister for Aged Care pointed out that it would cost more to provide aged care if staff were to receive paid sick leave. This approach does not count the cost of the present pandemic in terms of individual suffering, family grief, and also in the provision of additional medical and support services to try to overcome the crisis in the aged care industry. What price now on well trained loyal permanent staff with decent work entitlements, including sick leave?

Two arguments in defence of the casualisation of employment are that some workers prefer this arrangement, and that it is cost effective for the economy. I have no argument with workers having a choice about their terms of employment, but few in casual employment have any real choice. It is a case of take what is offered or be out of work.

The cost to the economy depends on how narrowly you define the costs. In some industries, casuals are paid a higher rate of hourly pay than permanent employees. In a recent Federal Court ruling it was decided that this extra payment was to recompense workers for the uncertainty of their continued income, but employers have taken the case to the High Court arguing that the payments in part compensate for

loss of entitlements that permanent workers receive. The pay differential is normally not as much as the employer pays in additional benefits for permanent staff. Therefore, many employers take the cheapest labour option. The way to achieve real choice in employment options is to make the cost per hour to the employer equal for casual or permanent employment (full or part-time). Where employers evade sick leave, and other entitlements by using casual staff, a government levy per hour of employment, equal to the cost of providing decent conditions of employment, would even up the labour market options. Then employers and workers could choose casual or permanent employment without incurring additional costs either way.

Casual work can be justified in some circumstances where there is intermittent high demand for labour. For example, in the case of security for sporting events like the Australian Open and the Boxing Day Test, a lot of staff are required for a short period of time. However, other so-called casual work in the security and other industries is on a regular basis, such as in the case for nursing homes, where the care is required on a continuing basis. It is claimed in the current court case, that the company was employing 'casual' staff on rosters set out for 12 months ahead. The company and the Minister admit that this arrangement was to increase profits at the expense of the workers.

In other industries, fixed term contracts are used, as is the case in post-school education settings. Many higher education staff are employed during term time year after year, but accrue no long-term entitlements. As the International Labour Office (ILO)¹ notes, the use of casual or fixed term contracts risks underinvestment in training and innovation and hence lower productivity. Normally, permanent part-time work with entitlements for continuing workplace training and for the accumulation of leave entitlements should be sufficient to provide flexibility in these industries.

Under the current arrangements, a casual workforce can be cost effective for employers and shareholders, because they get larger profits, but the present economic and health crisis raises questions about the national economic costs of casualisation. Even without the impact of the pandemic, I suspect that when the overall cost to the economy is measured, governments and charities are picking up the costs of unnecessary casual employment regimes, while employers and shareholders are taking the profits.

A further element of unfairness in the use of casual or contract workers is their protection against unfair dismissal. Casual and contract staff can be denied further work at the whim of the employer, making it difficult for casual staff to seek protection from unfair or abusive employment practices, including sexual harassment and racism. Permanent staff also have rights and entitlements in the case of redundancy.

The impact of so-called labour force flexibility on the whole of society needs to be considered when deciding casual employment conditions. By charging a levy on employers who opt for a casual workforce, the government could then provide casual staff with statutory sick leave payments, induction training, and possibly other benefits.

There are many questions to which I would like answers. One is why do many aged care workers have to take jobs in several care homes? What entitlements are employers avoiding by giving their staff very limited hours? For instance, how many employers avoid superannuation contributions? Another question is why are people who are employed on a casual basis as security guards not required in all circumstances to complete statutory induction training, and to have further annual training to maintain their competence? A levy on security firms using casual staff could fund this training. Also, are security firms in all cases required to undertake site-specific induction training?

In May 2020, the Prime Minister announced an inquiry into industrial relations reform. This is said to include a working group looking into casual and fixed term employment. However, the Federal Minister for Industrial Relations has already shown his hand by intervening in the present High Court case to argue that

the Federal Court decision in favour of casual staff in long-term employment should be overturned.

The federal industrial relations enquiry should look specifically into whether employers short change workers who are on casual or fixed term contracts. This should include the impact on workers in terms of protection from employer abuse, the provision of sick leave, and access for workers to home loans and other finance. It should also consider the impact of casual employment on society as a whole. We need a systematic and thorough investigation into the labour market aimed at achieving good employment conditions, an efficient system, and equity for all workers. ✎

Revd Dr Ralph Catts is a retired Unitarian minister and a member of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church.

1 See ILO at https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/non-standard-employment/WCMS_534826/lang--en/index.htm

from our readers



DEAR DONNA

Thanks for your wonderful journal. I look forward to it every month.

V Richardson, Vic

HI DONNA AND ALL AT THE BEACON

Thank you for the notice. A big thanks to all of you for your efforts in providing amazing and informative relief from what passes for MSM these days.

My sincerest best wishes to you all. Hope you are well and doing okay during this difficult time.

Regards

Kay Harris, NSW

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