

Terror in Australia: Investigating the rhetoric and the community

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It is the thirteenth anniversary of the fateful September 11 attacks: Prime Minister Tony Abbott announces that the terror threat-level has been raised to High. One week later, 800 highly-visible police officers raid homes across Sydney and Brisbane (Jabour, 2014), while on the same day Mr Abbott smiles for the camera as he farewells air force personnel leaving for Iraq (Hurst, 2014). Labelled “terrorism events” by a Counter-Terrorism review, the Melbourne stabbing of two police officers and the Martin Place Sydney Siege join the ranks of the Bali bombings, the London train attacks and the US-Libyan embassy attack in a timeline of the post-9/11 era (Australian Government, 2015, p 4). Mr Abbott emotively notes the tragedy of “politically-motivated” attacks on “Australian values” (Griffiths, 2014) – aptly observing that one-third of “terrorism events” have occurred in the six months after raising the terror level (Grattan, 2015).

Monday morning, the 23rd of February, 2015 – while introducing new counter-terrorism strategies to toughen immigration laws, remove citizenship, suspend passports and cancel welfare payments of “persons of interest” – Mr Abbott remarks “I’ve often heard western leaders describe Islam as a ‘religion of peace’. I wish more Muslim leaders would say that more often, and mean it” (Lloyd, 2015). Indeed, he is correct: President Barack Obama tells the world his country is not at war with Islam (AJ, 2015); Chancellor Angela Merkel stands with Muslim leaders at public anti-violence rallies (Huggler, 2015); and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop applauds Australian Muslims who are working with the government, community groups and

mosques “to keep our people safe” (Medhora, 2015). Yet Mr Abbott, faced with declining popularity, capitalises on a time-tested rhetoric that illuminates a politics of fear, clinging to a hard-line approach that confirms suspicion of the ‘Other’. At a time when 4,000 foreign fighters have been recruited from Western countries into ISIL’s ranks, including 250 young Australians (Neumann, 2014), a hard image, tough lines and harsh policy may seem justified – yet it does little to combat the core causes of radicalisation in Australian communities. It is also isolating Arab and Muslim leaders, of whom collaboration with is vital to combat radicalisation and extremism in Australia (Medhora, 2015).

Tougher immigration laws do not save Australia from potential threats. When in 1996 Man Haron Monis arrived in Australia, immigration authorities had no way of knowing that he would later commit the Martin Place Siege. In the 18 years that he lived in Australia, Monis was at different points charged with accessory to murder and multiple sexual offences; he received welfare payments, mental and physical treatment from community health services; he worked – very much in the system and out-on-bail. According to the Commonwealth and NSW Review, officials handled the situation as successfully as possible (Australian Government, 2015). If perhaps authorities possessed evidence of a ‘radicalised’ Monis, suspending his welfare payments would be a reductionist punishment, doing little to prevent an already vulnerable person committing a crime. More likely such actions isolate and marginalise those at-risk, pushing them into extremism.

Yet it is important to identify at-risk peoples on the fringe like Monis. Parliamentary-recommended data retention is one avenue (Australian government, 2015). Another way is to work with communities to target potential radicalisation and support at-risk people. Attorney-General George Brandis recently attended a White House Summit

on Countering Violent Extremism, which identified three core issues: building awareness, countering extremist narratives and community-led intervention. The Australian government “Living Safe Together” program is aimed at detecting radicalisation early. Yet while the government initially set aside \$13.4 million for community engagement programs, only \$1 million is available for 2014-15. Imagine: A young adult, finding their identity, their role in society. At a time of 35% youth unemployment (Parliament of Australia, 2014), 18 year old Abdul Numan Haider was one of those young men – impressionable, vulnerable, described once as “conscientious”. At 16-years-old, he turned to Melbourne’s gangs and was later recruited by radical group Al-Furqan. By the time he was 18, ISIL’s propaganda machine was at his fingertips on Twitter. According to reports, his parents had become increasingly concerned about his behaviour. In the months leading up to his death, he had his passport cancelled by authorities – yet this did not prevent the deaths of two police officers (Oakes, 2014). Community-led intervention, peer support and early detection of radicalisation must be the way.

It is of utmost importance that governments openly engage constructively and comprehensively not just with Islamic communities, but with Australian society as a whole. Counter-terrorism in Australia must not be an effort made solely by faceless ASIO officials or government suits. An inclusive societal approach aimed at building a culture of critical awareness, in which Australians are smarter than extremists, disallows them to create and exploit division. To forge a community that protects and supports, rather than vilifies and demonises; that recognises recruited youths as victims of extremism, rather than antagonists. In this, violent extremism can be *prevented*, instead of punished, when the crime has been committed and the ramifications emblazoned.

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