

Leaked Australian Document Reveals Plans for Mass Surveillance of Immigrants

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A document leaked last month revealed that the Australian government is preparing an extensive build-up of spying and anti-democratic measures aimed against immigrants from working class backgrounds. While few details were contained in the document, it sets out what can only be described as a police-state framework of mass surveillance.

Once again, the government is exploiting escalating scare campaigns globally and in Australia about terrorism to overturn fundamental legal and democratic rights. It is bringing forward a blueprint for continuous monitoring of immigrants and more severe citizenship tests to block access to the basic democratic rights of permanent residence and citizenship.

The document, obtained by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) “Lateline” program, reports a series of recommendations to the national security committee of cabinet following a meeting last November. The final plan is due to be unveiled by Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton in the first half of this year.

One key recommendation is to change the visa system in order to “remove direct access to permanent residence” and “better align visa and citizenship decision-making with national security and community protection outcomes.”

This proposal would further strip working class immigrants of the right to become citizens. Under the *Australian Citizenship Act*, people seeking citizenship must have lived in the country for four years and have had permanent residency for at least 12 months.

The government has already removed access to citizenship for any refugees who succeed in reaching Australia. They are granted only Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs), which deny them permanent residency, and also bar them from bringing their family members, even their spouses and children, to Australia.

The leaked recommendations indicate an expansion of this draconian regime to any refugees selected by the government from overseas or those granted humanitarian visas to enter Australia, and possibly to wider layers of immigrants.

The document also calls for an “enforceable integration framework” by revamping the “Citizenship Test and Citizenship Pledge to strengthen accountability for commitments made at Citizenship conferral.” These measures are designed to further restrict access to citizenship and justify new powers to revoke citizenships, thus stripping individuals of fundamental democratic rights of residence, voting and access to health, education and welfare services.

Following the still-unexplained 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, the Howard Liberal-National government, supported by the Labor Party, imposed a new citizenship test. It forced applicants to answer 30 written questions, all in English, on Australian “values,” history and society.

As well as requiring people to identify with “values” defined by the government, the test was designed to discriminate against non-English speaking migrants and poorer immigrants who could not afford thousands of dollars for English lessons.

The legislation gave the government enhanced powers to deny citizenship, and basic democratic rights that come with it, to anyone who was regarded as being not of “good character” or who received an adverse security assessment by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the domestic spy agency. This gave governments and ASIO wide scope to bar citizenship to anyone regarded as a political threat to the ruling establishment.

These mechanisms were taken further when the *Australian Citizenship (Allegiance to Australia) Act* was introduced last December, again with bipartisan support. This legislation hands the government the power to strip citizenship from any dual citizen by ministerial decree on the basis of allegations of involvement in terrorism, fighting for a foreign force or other offences.

The leaked document proposes stricter “security checks” on the intake of 12,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees that the government promised last September as millions of people fled the devastating wars instigated by the US and its allies, including Australia, in the Middle East. The government’s commitment was only made reluctantly, amid an outpouring of public support for the refugees.

According to the document, the security checks must exceed “those put in place by European countries to manage the irregular movement of people across continental Europe.” The screening regime imposed by the government is already so severe that only 26 Syrian refugees had been settled in Australia by last month.

The document recommends that “these additional screening criteria be applied to the entire Humanitarian Program,” thus extending the assessments conducted by ASIO to every person seeking a humanitarian visa.

Going further, the document proposes a “visa risk assessment tool that establishes an intelligence-led threat identification and risk profiling capability incorporating immigration as well as national security and criminality risk for visa applicants.”

This would require “enhanced access, use and protection of sensitive information to strengthen intelligence-led, risk-based decision making across the continuum, from pre-visa stage through to post-citizenship conferral.” This proposal is tantamount to a monitoring system for all visa holders for their entire lives, even after they become citizens.

The pretext for this surveillance is the threat of terrorism and “Australia’s potential exposure to the risks posed by extremism and radicalisation of migrants, including humanitarian entrants.” The document cites last year’s terrorist attacks in Paris and “social unrest” in Cologne—both highly dubious events that have been seized upon by media outlets and governments around the world to ramp up police powers and anti-refugee xenophobia.

Likewise, the document invokes two equally doubtful events in Australia—the 2014 Sydney cafe siege and the police killing of Abdul Numan Haider, an Afghani teenager, in Melbourne, Victoria—to justify placing all immigrant families under surveillance.

Without providing details, the document advocates measures that enhance “social cohesion” to reduce the “risk of radicalisation.” It refers to an “extremist landscape” in Australia that has been “significantly influenced by our refugee intake and subsequent related migration from relatives and spouses (chain migration).” In other government documents, references to “radicalisation” and “extremism” have gone far beyond terrorism to include left-wing, environmental and anti-capitalist activism.

In a particularly inflammatory and xenophobic section, the document states: “The most prominent ethnic group amongst Australian Sunni extremists are the Lebanese.” It asserts that the majority of these extremist “cohorts” were from the refugee intake during the 1975-90 Lebanese civil war “as well as their extended families and Australia-born descendants.”

As well as pointing to ethnic and religious profiling, the document calls for the tighter selection of immigrants on “an economic basis”—that is, on their capacity to be profitably exploited by employers and the corporate elite more generally.

In the name of “social cohesion” the document disparages family reunion immigration and claims better “integration” by “Skill stream migrants” who are better equipped with the “three E’s”: “English language proficiency, education and employment.”

Once it was leaked, Immigration Minister Dutton denied seeing the cabinet document. Nevertheless, he confirmed its thrust. He insisted that the government would be “tough in terms of the screening processes” because “this is a very serious time for our country, for Western democracies ... people will pretend to be refugees when they’re not.”

Labor leader Bill Shorten said nothing about the content of the document, instead criticising the government as “disturbingly” leak-prone on “national security.” Labor’s shadow immigration minister Richard Marles echoed Shorten’s comments, while saying the document “verges dangerously down the path of putting in place a discriminatory immigration policy.”

In truth, the document’s recommendations are completely in line with the regressive agenda pioneered by the Labor Party, which first introduced the mandatory detention of refugees in 1992 and reopened the offshore detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island in 2012. Labor has also voted for the barrage of anti-terrorism and citizenship legislation, overturning basic democratic rights.

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