

The “Era of Terrorism”: Sydney’s Lindt Café Hostage Crisis, Australia’s Prime Minister Abbott’s Response

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The inquiry into Sydney’s Lindt Café hostage crisis (not, as has become popular to deem it, a siege) has come out with some police state fanfare. Terminal governments tend to scrounge for poor solutions, and much of this is to be found in the joint report by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and NSW Government Premier and Cabinet. Notably, it is called *Martin Place Siege – Joint Commonwealth – New South Wales review* (Jan 2015).[1]

The report’s greatest flaw lie in its assumptions and presumptions. The hostage taker, Man Haron Monis, an individual of specific, dangerous eccentricity, who had been allowed a visa, and had, in fact, been monitored by the security services, was an individual agent till the day he was slain, rather than a tribal extension or lonely jihadi footsoldier. There was no “network” behind him; nor was there even a coherent ideological milieu to anchor him. Afloat in a sea of manic pretensions, he went out with a not very solicitous bang, taking two hostages with him.

But the terrorism analytical fraternity has given us a strained construction to play with – that of the lone-wolf terrorist, which is one way of admitting that their own analytical constructions have failed. This involves an effort to pack two concepts together: that of a terrorist supposedly drunk with ideological or religious fervour, and that of your orthodox criminal best dealt with under standard criminal procedure.

Using such a muddled category attempts to net the individual who is otherwise an individual agent manageable before conventional legal process, marching to a very different, if confused beat. It is within this context that the *Martin Place Siege* report should be read, an account of conflation, combination and pressing, one that enlarges the significance of a criminal action that became dressed for an Australian “counter-terrorist” awakening. There is, however, a sense, that the authors of the report have been straining between two poles: that of seeing Monis as a typical representative of current Islamic fanaticism; or as a troubled pariah of the law.

The scope of the findings will have significance, though the report is prone to hedging. Bad laws tend to always produce collectively bad results. The report, for instance, reminds the reader of Australia’s regime of control orders and preventative detention orders, much of these premised on the troubling notion of anticipating an offence rather than making a person who has actually committed one account for what happened. This is done despite an admission that Monis never triggered their use.

For all the acts of his violently cluttered past, “Monis had still not breached terrorism laws or

met the threshold to trigger the availability of national security powers, such as a control order or preventative detention order.” It is almost with a heavy sigh that the report notes that, “at no point prior to the siege could he have been successfully charged with a terrorism offence under the law”.

Then come a few lines which the authoritarian voyeurs of the press and parliament have ignored – an admission that mere public renunciations of one religion for another might, in themselves, constitute any significant security threat. (Read, pose a genuine terrorist threat animated by global fundamentalist movements.) Monis was somewhat wobbly, abandoning his already dubious Shia credentials for that of Sunni Islam in an instant. “In the current security environment, factors including an individual’s public renunciation of Shia for Sunni Islam or swearing allegiance to an unnamed ‘Caliph’ are not, in and of themselves, indicators of direct security concern.”

Recommendations are made about immigration, suggesting policies and legislative changes “necessary to support decisions to grant or revoke an initial visa, subsequent visas, and citizenship.” This came in light of the assessment that “in the same circumstances, Monis would likely be granted entry to Australia and citizenship if he presented in 2015”.

Immigration processes had to “reflect changing national security considerations” – a desperate admission of post hoc ergo propter hoc. The Monis who presented himself at the Lindt Café was not the same man who arrived in Australia in 1996. Reading between these lines, the report is expecting immigration officials to be skilful clairvoyants. The more likely outcome will entail exclusionary rules.

There are suggestions that gun laws on trafficking be tightened, despite the report admitting that the pump action shot gun may well have been in the country legally to begin with. Questions were asked on whether Monis should have been “detained for mental health treatment”. The Chief psychiatrist felt that all the decisions dealing with him had been sound.

Other issues are also trawled – was Monis a suitable welfare recipient? The answer is invariably yes. “Monis was generally a compliant income support client.” Dark clouds may well be gathering over welfare reform as well.

Then come the “programs”. Emphasis is made on expediting “work on a Countering Violent Extremism referral program, including ensuring it is appropriately resourced”. This suggests that Monis, deemed mentally ill on the one hand, and a radicalised agent of Islam on the other, could be the beneficial subject of such panaceas. The very idea is tinged with more than a touch of ludicrousness, given the nature of the man’s disposition to begin with. Oscillating between forms of sectarianism, idealism and philosophical costumes, he was arguably beyond the reach of any such recipe for action. What the *Martin Place Siege* report suggests is a sweetly targeted delusion: that radicalisation programs necessarily work in their theoretical and practical scope, and that Muslim communities must be strongarmed into being agents of the cause.

As a final point, the report uses the incomprehensible verbiage of the modern bureaucrat analyst, centred on such organisational gibberish as “prioritisation” models. There are “Lead Prioritisation Categories”, schematised as “High Priority Lead”, “Medium Priority Lead” heading down to “No Priority assigned” which are, incidentally, those “Leads not relating to imminent threat and with few security indicators.” A cardinal rule of security

policy: make it unintelligible.

What matters to the government is that the enemy, a foreign apparition made flesh, managed to pass the Australian gates with his baggage of lies and dangerous intentions. A cobbled language of pseudo-mythology is used by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, and one chosen to illustrate that, while the “system” (as if it had some force of nature) had generally worked, there were chinks to iron out. Monis was a supremely disturbed combine, a “monster [who] should not have been in our community” or “allowed into the country”. “He shouldn’t have been out on bail. He shouldn’t have been with a gun and he shouldn’t have become radicalised.”

Such ironing out would need the necessary qualifications of liberties. We were, after all, in the “era of terrorism”, stated as if a holy law had somehow decreed it. The solution, obviously for the prime minister and his front bench, involves the corrosion of individual freedoms for the safety of that hopeless abstraction called the community. “We need to ask ourselves, at what stage do we need to change the tipping point from protection of the individual to the safety of the community.”

All for what, exactly? It was as if Abbott was channelling the events of “lone-wolf” terrorism that had filled the US security manual (for all that occurs in the US must, invariably, occur in Australia to give it relevance): the shooting at the ticket counter at LAX airport by Hesham Mohamed Hadayet in 2002; the killings at Fort Hood, Texas, by Army Major Nidal Hassan in 2009; and the shooting at the military recruiting office in Little Rock, Arkansas by Muslim convert Carlos Bledsoe.

Governments in trouble need hot air to keep them afloat. The risk of being punctured, however, is all too real. Abbott knows that it is far better to avoid the book of evidence, and favour the book of speculation, if he wants to retain government at the next election. The ploy is a dangerous one. The risk, as it always is with such a situation, is that he might be found out, the naked emperor whose ploy is uncovered.

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Note

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-22/sydney-siege-joint-review-released-visa-citizenship-reforms/6184012>

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