Push for unbridled spy powers

Bob Briton

Federal Attorney-General George Brandis made a hash of his interview on Sky News while trying to explain the implications of the retention of “metadata”. The problem wasn’t so much his lack of knowledge about the nature of the information to be stored by phone companies and internet service providers (ISPs) but his extreme caution not to let the cat out the bag. The requirement will lay bare the web browsing history and important details of phone conversations of all Australians to spy agencies for two years. The total reach of this surveillance has sparked widespread opposition and the parliamentary Labor Party must move from its attitude of “concern” to utter rejection.

The legislation will come before the parliament later in the year in another tranche of “security” measures. The government has chosen this moment to press for major new spy powers. Images posted on Twitter of a child, allegedly the son of an Australian man, holding the severed heads of victims of terror group ISIS fighting in Syria have been used to sell the legislation. Lurid scenarios of trained and indoctrinated terrorists returning to Australia to wreak havoc are being concocted to justify stripping the whole community of its rights before the law and to privacy.

Senator Brandis also mentioned the use of mobile phone metadata in apprehending the murderer of ABC employee Jill Meagher. The fact this was possible under current legislation was raised by the Sky news presenter but not acknowledged by the Attorney-General during his train-wreck of an interview. In reality, there are no new developments to warrant such a grab for spy powers. “The terrorist threat in this country has not changed, nevertheless it’s as high as it’s ever been,” PM Tony Abbott said.

The Prime Minister’s office later rushed to the aid of Senator Brandis with an unconvincing interpretation of its own regarding individuals’ web browsing history. The full browsing history of an individual will not be included in the metadata to be held by ISPs. Either that or it won’t be available without a warrant.

The measure may struggle to get through federal parliament resumes later this month. There is the reversal of the onus of proof for individuals returning from conflict zones where there is a suspicion they may have taken a belligerent role. This turns Australian legal tradition on its head. The concept of “terrorism” will be expanded from planning or engaging in acts to advocating or encouraging “terrorism” by any means including social media. The threshold for arrest without warrant will be lowered and the period allowed for detention for questioning extended. So will preventative detention orders, stop and search and seizure of sections of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) was shelved in order to get support from the Muslim community for the current spy agency power grab. Arguments for the gutting of the RDA simply lacked credibility or decency.

Unfortunately, the parliamentary Labor Party is giving “in principle” approval to a host of other measures due to be decided when the security Legislation Monitor it was seeking to scrap. It claimed the agency was targeted as a cost cutting initiative. Its retention is a poorly concealed sop to concerns over this latest tilt for greater spying powers over the Australian people.

“The ramping up of police and ASIO powers goes beyond the sweeping measures taken by the Howard government in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks in the US. That legislation, which was said to impose temporariety on the rights of Australians, is due to expire in 2015 and 2016. The Abbott government has said it will retain the National Security Legislation Monitor it was seeking to scrap. It claimed the agency was targeted as a cost cutting initiative. Its retention is a poorly concealed sop to concerns over this latest tilt for greater spying powers over the Australian people.

“When it comes to counter-terrorism, everyone needs to be part of Team Australia,” the PM said recently. What he means is that we should buy into the loss of our own democratic rights. We are also being asked to kick in an additional $630 million to security and police agencies to allow this to happen. No is the answer. No more spy powers.
Israel’s real enemy

Israel continues to unleash the full force of its military against the captive Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip. As of Sunday August 10, almost 2,000 Palestinians had been murdered by the Israeli military, close to 500 of them children. Thousands more have been seriously injured since the bombardment began a month ago. According to UN figures, 73 percent of all those killed were civilians. At the same time, 67 Israelis have lost their lives, three of them civilians. UN shelters, hospitals, ambulances, refuges, mosques, civilian infrastructure, whole neighbourhoods, schools and universities have been deliberately shelled. Daily media reports and images of the death and suffering continue to shock people around the world.

Worldwide opposition is mounting to the Israeli slaughter with calls for peace and the lifting of the blockade on Gaza. In Australia, there have been rallies in the major cities over the last four weekends. The most recent of them, on Saturday August 9, saw Jews, Muslims, Christians, and others join as one to call a halt to the war on Gaza. “Free Gaza”, “Stop Israel’s War on Gaza”, “Lift the Blockade”, “Boycott Israel”, “Freedom for Palestine”, were some of the demands on the day.

Yet Western governments, including those of Australia, the US and Britain, remain silent, hiding behind the lie that such action is necessary to protect the security of Israel. As one placard at the rally in Sydney said, “Silence is a war crime”. In Israel, thousands of courageous people have also taken part in protest actions.

In the case of Israel, Operation Protective Edge is defended as retaliation (for three civilian deaths) or self-defence, that Israel is defending itself against Hamas rockets. “Rockets are raining down on Israeli cities and towns, and our troops are face-to-face with ruthless killers in Gaza,” claims one Orthodox Jewish website (chabad.org).

Murdoch’s The Australian newspaper takes a similar line, with a commentator writing “Israel’s defense minister sees rain on our cities as talks continue” (09-08-2014). Naftali Bennett, a member of Israel’s security cabinet responded to the “raining down” of Hamas rockets on cities with the warning: “This is a test for Israel. If Tehran’s end sees rain down on our cities it is because Israel is a test case for the world”. The statement continues: “ naïve nations who dare to criticise Israel’s actions or support Palestinian rights labelled as “anti-Semitic” and gagged. Anti-Zionism is the real enemy of the state of Israel, which has one of the world’s largest military forces. These crimes represent another episode of the series of barbaric attacks waged by the terrorist gangs of “ISIS” against the Yazidi people that aim at eliminating this indigenous cultural and religious component of Iraq. These terrorist and rogue gangs have killed the children of Yazidi people, captured and enslaved their women, destroyed their temples and desecrated their religious symbols. These heinous crimes are classified under international law as crimes against humanity.

These crimes represent another episode of the series of barbaric attacks waged by the terrorist gangs of “ISIS” against the Yazidi people and Yazidis; Sunnis and Shiites, including Arabs, Kurds, Turcomans and Shabaks. Hindus, Christians and Yazidis; Sumnis and Shiites.

While reaffirming the Iraqi Communist Party’s full solidarity with our Yazidi people in their cruel plight and sharing their pain as a result of this ordeal, we express our readiness to provide all possible help and contribution to the joint efforts to alleviate their suffering.

We call on the Iraqi state and all its institutions to speed up the delivery of relief aid to the hundreds of thousands of displaced people who sought refuge in the mountains and caves under deteriorating conditions, and to provide the human, material and technical resources needed to accomplish these urgent tasks. In this regard, we call upon international organisations and the international community to deal with what is happening in Iraq as crimes against humanity.

The recapturing of the areas seized by “ISIS” and eliminating it are urgent and immediate objectives that require mobilising all national efforts. This necessitates accelerating the efforts to overcome the existing differences between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, and to achieve the broadest possible cooperation and coordination at both the political and military levels to ward off the dangers threatening Iraq. This also requires resolving speedily the naming of the Prime Minister nominee and embarking on forming an all-encompassing national unity government that is able to address the daunting tasks facing our country at this historic juncture.

Baghdad – 6 August 2014

The following letter has been signed by a number of Australian politicians.

We the undersigned members of Australian federal and state parliaments, call on all Australian politicians to condemn the ongoing Israeli military bombardment and invasion of Gaza.

We call on Australian politicians to support an immediate cessation of hostilities and a ceasefire deal which includes an end to Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories and to the blockade of Gaza.

We call on all Australian politicians to support the United Nations Human Rights Council’s decision to launch an independent inquiry into purported violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

The United Nations says at least 75 percent of the dead are civilians, including an estimated 108 children.

The rockets fired from Gaza are not in any way justified and insofar as they threaten and harm civilians are illegal under international law. However, these imprecise rockets cannot be compared with the broadscale bombing of Gaza by Israel which has one of the world’s largest military forces.

Collective punishment is not permitted under the Geneva conventions and is a war crime.

Hospitals, places of worship, and a centre for people with disabilities have been among the Israeli military’s targets.

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The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) is providing shelter to more than 102,788 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The international community including Australia has a vital responsibility to put pressure on Israel to end its current military attack on Gaza and broker a solution of justice and peace.

At the time of going to press 55 MPs had signed.

Any Australian politician who would like to add their name to this letter may contact the office of Melissa Parke or Senator Lee Rhiannon: melissa.parke.mp@aph.gov.au or sen.rhiannon@aph.gov.au.

Australian MPs take action on Gaza

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Discrimination backdown we come, but threat remains

Peter Mac

The Abbott government’s decision to drop its proposed deletion of Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act is certainly good news. However, the decision was intended to shore up electoral support rather than support human rights.

Section 18C prohibits offending, humiliating, insulting or intimidat- ing individuals because of their race, colour or ethnic or national origin. The proposal to delete 18C was a pre- election promise by Abbott to media “shock jock” Andrew Bolt, who had formerly been convicted of violating the Act.

The proposal was castigated by the legal fraternity, and the Indige- nous, Jewish, Arabic, Chinese, Greek and Cypriot communities united in opposition to it. Fairfax journalist Jacqueline Maley commented with regard to members of these communities: “Making offensive statements about a person is categorically differ- ent to offending someone over (for example) their religion, they say. Skin colour is not a matter of belief or choice. If you insult or offend a black person for being black, you are attacking their dignity as a human, not their choices or beliefs (which in a free society are up for discussion, even if that discussion is offensive).”

The government then decided to retain Section 18C, but to still remove from it the key words that specifically prohibited insulting, humiliating or offending behaviour, which obviously had much the same effect as the original proposal. Public feelings remained intense, and the government received 4,100 submis- sions, 76 percent of which opposed the amended proposal.

Federal Attorney-General George Brandis had publicly defend- ed the amendment less than 24 hours before the decision. However, some Coalition MPs feared that altering the Act would cause electoral damage in marginal seats with large communi- ties of migrants, many of whom are outraged by the Liberals’ unwavering support for Israel, including its cur- rent attack on Gaza.

Craig Laundy, Liberal Member for Reid in western Sydney, wants the Liberals to change their position and vote for Palestinian statehood. Other Liberals worry about losing electoral support to Labor.

The NSW branch of the ALP recently supported de- militarisation of Gaza under UN supervi- sion, noting that “If … there is no progress towards a two-state solu- tion and if Israel continues to build and expand settlements, a Labor government will consult like-minded na- tions towards recognition of the Palestinian state.”

How to lose friends and offend everyone

The government’s move to leave clause 18C intact is widely seen as a cynical attempt to buy the votes of migrant Australians, especially Muslims. Moreover, the decision to pull back from altering 18C was announced during a press conference on the highly dangerous so-called anti-terror laws.

The government was, in effect, offering to preserve 18C if migrant voters assented to its proposal to expand those laws. But it didn’t work.

Moreover, a great many allies of the Coalition have expressed bitter disappointment at the government’s decision to leave the Racial Discrimi- nation Act alone — for the moment.

After the announcement one Liberal MP lamented: “We’re now in the worst of both worlds — we’ve defended the rights of bigots and now we’re selling out the bigots.”

Andrew Bolt was notified about the decision shortly before it was publicly announced. He complained bitterly: “Too many lobby groups hate free speech and the reforms were badly sold.”

Supporters of the ultra-right-wing think tank the Institute for Public Affairs besieged Craig Laundy with 257 emails attacking his criticism of the government for the proposed changes to 18C.

Family First Senator Bob Day denounced the government’s deci- sion to pull back, declaring that Brandis’ reworded amendment had “got it right”. He intends to resubmit the amendment exactly as Brands had rewritten it, as a private member’s bill in the Senate.

Such a move would be excu- ciatingly embarrassing for the gov- ernment. Brandis would be forced to oppose a bill he drafted and still believes in, despite his public repu- diation of it.

Another right-wing critic of the proposal’s retraction was Tim Wilson, whom the government had appointed as the Human Rights Com- missioner (which he once said should be abolished), and who enthusiasti- cally supported removal of 18C.

In a Fairfax Press article last week Wilson argued that Clause 18C violated the right to freedom of speech. Ignoring the fact that right- wing internet communications and shock jock broadcasts incited the Cronulla race attacks, he declared that “On the internet we can access the most hateful and absurd websites, and yet our society has not become corrupted in the process.”

Despite this, Wilson accepted the need for laws against libel, slander and copyright violations. Moreover, and apparently without seeing the contradiction in his own position, he acknowledged that “… we make speech illegal … because it conflicts with the human rights of others.”

Exactly! Every human right must be judged in respect to other rights. They’re relative, not absolute.

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The next event for the Cuban 5 will be on Friday September 5 at 5pm in Martin Place. A free event with Aili Labanino Cardoso and the art exhibition of 15 paintings from inside prison from Antonio Cuban 5 and to distribute information about Aili Labanino the daughter of Ramon Labanino currently visiting Australia.

The investigations also show that AGl made a further $51,550 in political donations before Stage 1 was approved by the government, but failed to update the Planning Department with this information.

“Of course we want to make decisions, but we will do it when we are ready. We have to listen to the people and understand that doesn’t mean ‘yes, we can go ahead’. The senior Elders (at Gunbalanya) are saying, ‘Let us talk with TOs. We want to negotiate, but didn’t agree anything about the 99-year lease. ‘When Yolngu say ‘yes’, we understand that doesn’t mean ‘yes, we can go ahead’. The senior Elders (at Gunbalanya) are saying, ‘Let us consider it more. Give us a bit of time to think about these things.’

“The Department needs to be reminded that it’s there to serve the people of New South Wales and that the public interest should be front and centre of their decision-making. They should not have even accepted this application.”

“Mining companies say they want ‘certainty’, but that what they really want is a guarantee they will get their way every time. Having had the regulations rigged in their favour, they are not going to change the Department’s position.”

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“The government is promising that there’ll be these good things coming out of the 99-year lease or any lease that we are asked to sign up. When the government comes, they won’t talk only about the good things, but also the negative. The last thing we want is to lose our identity, our culture and our land.”

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“Of course we want to make business, of course we want to run businesses and make corpora- tions, but we do it when we are ready, and we will do it with help from the community.”

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On August 5 a small group gathered outside the US Consulate in Martin Place Sydney to demand the release of the Cuban 5 and to distribute information about Aili Labanino the daughter of Ramon Labanino currently visiting Australia. She is a young fighter and a good public speaker with many personal stories demanding the release of the Cuban 5.

A free event with Aili Labanino Cardoso and the art exhibition of 15 paintings from inside prison from Antonio Cuban 5 and to distribute information about Aili Labanino the daughter of Ramon Labanino currently visiting Australia.

There is no reason to go through all of this again. The people of Bulga have earned a break. Why must we make submissions on a coal mine project that has already been through this same assessment process and been rejected in court?

“There’s also the rest of the community living here. Where are their rights? They’ve been brought in from their clan estates into a hub community. And they’ve been forgotten about. They have no say whatever in this community, which they would have back home on their country. We, at the Yolngu Nations Assembly, want to sit with people, negotiate and explain things. Sometimes there are non-government people who want to help our people understand.”

“We banned donations from property developers because of the corrupting influence this has on project approvals. Well, mining and gas projects are far more valuable than property developments, and the companies want them in their deep pockets. It’s time to ban political donations from mining and drill- ing companies.”
The government’s Financial System Inquiry handed down an interim report on July 15, raising a number of options for probable comment. The underlying thread of the report is consistent with calls for the government to butt out and not “interfere”. The measures include further deregulation of the finance sector, removal of barriers to foreign financial institutions, greater integration internationally, removal of government guarantees and protections for customers, the ability to raid their accounts in a crisis.

In the name of “self-regulation”, the financial institutions would regulate and monitor their own activities, with little or no accountability to the government. The outcome would be even greater domination by the sector and fatter profits at the expense of customers.

The Inquiry is tasked with making recommendations to reduce the “regulatory burden on the financial services sector” which has control over $5 trillion in banking, superannuation, insurance and financial investments – much of it working savings. It is chaired by former Commonwealth Bank (CBA) CEO David Murray. The other four panel members have backgrounds covering insurance, superannuation, investment funds and big business. Needless to say, consumer organisations and trade unions are excluded from representation.

On many of the critical issues, it calls for further discussion and holds back from indicating its position. None-the-less its main aims are clear.

Monopoly dominance

The report notes that “Most sectors of the Australian financial system are concentrated”, and “this concentration has increased over the past 15 years, in particular in banking since the global financial crisis (GFC).” Banking is dominated by the four Big Banks. “Indeed, market concentration can be a by-product of competition.”

As Lenin pointed out in Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism, “This transformation of competition into monopoly is one of the most important – if not the most important – phenomena of modern capitalist economy.”

“Monopoly” is a term the report avoids. The report also notes that “personal general insurance also has a relatively high degree of market concentration.”

“How Competition can be increased by deregulation and opening up to foreign banks on the same terms as domestic banks is discussed in another report. This is the direction the government is heading in its secret negotiations around the Trade in Services Agreement (TISA).” (See Guardian, #1647, 16-07-2014, “Expanding the power of financial institutions to enter a sector of capital, it is critical that Australia continues to adopt appropriate international standards.”

“Too big to fail”

The GFC saw the Rudd Labor government increase the amount of capital banks were required to hold against loans and the introduction of a scheme to protect retail deposits up to $50,000. The government stimulated spending in the economy with a multi-billion dollar package of handouts and programs (schools, pools, bikes, etc.).

The term “too big to fail” was coined, in reference to the fallout across the economy and globally if one of the big financial institutions went belly up. The global impact of the collapse of the Lehman’s, in particular, is that governments look to at strengthening the stability of the financial system.

The report raises the question of further increasing the amount of capital that the big banks are required to hold against loans, a proposal supported by the Big Four. They were surprised that it came from a former CEO of the CBA. But the Inquiry is clearly expecting more “systemic crises” and fears “the systemic risks posed by large banks.”

It is concerned with the stability of the system but rejects govern- ment guarantees and the concept of “too big to fail”. This is in line with the Coalition government’s “marketdomination” ideology.

“Investors can rationally surmise that the government may be less likely to rescue them than the overdraft customers of a bank, or not honour or repay deposits or loans of large entities.”

“The inquiry recognises the need to move to a system where capital requirements are based on risk.”

Conflict of interest

The report also offers an option measures to “increase the ability to impose losses on creditors of a financial institution in the event of its failure.” Translating that into simple English, a bank, or other financial institution could raid the savings or investments of its customers to bail itself out of difficulty. Remember Cyprus!

Delegation

“Governments have a role in both preventing the build-up of systemic risk and designing a framework in which financial failure is managed in an orderly and cost-effective manner.”

“Where possible, the financial system should be subject and responsive to market forces. It should not be politicised to the extent that the government sets prices, or mandates non-commercial financial decisions to resolve government fiscal problems such as requiring banks to hold government mortgage debt. Market discipline, through competition or self-regulation, is generally preferred to govern- ment intervention.”

It is also the Inquiry’s view that “financial system regulators need sufficient powers, independence and resourcing, but they should also be subject to rigorous accountability mechanisms.”

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“One government-guaranteed national superannuation scheme which offers defined benefits (an indexed fortnightly pension) on retirement and invests in public infrastructure, public housing and develop- ment of renewable energy, would provide security in retirement, create jobs and be of benefit to the whole community. The CPA is proposing such a fund be set up and workers would be entitled to transfer to it on a voluntary basis.

Wider agenda

The Abbott government has embarked on a massive overhaul of the role of government and structure of the economy. Treasurer Joe Hockey’s first budget gave an indication of where the government is headed in relation to social secu- rity, education, health, military and other government spending. So too the corporate tax cuts and gutting of the public sector and privatisation of remaining government assets. Trade unions, workers’ wages and working conditions are also in the firing line.

There are around 50 govern- ment inquiries and reviews being carried out by representatives of the largest corporations. The National Audit Commission, chaired by the former head of the Business Coun- cil of Australia, was one of the first to be formed. Other inquiries are being conducted by energy target, communications and media, Fair Work Act, superannu- ation, social security, trade union governance, industry, health, education, community services and the financial system regulators, among other areas facing a radical overhaul.

For a government that performs but fundamental changes to the fabric and structure of the economy and society is not for the faint-hearted.
In late 2008, Lex Wotton was found guilty on the single count of rioting with destruction. The Brisbane District Court spent two weeks on the trial. It took the all-White jury several days to deliver a unanimously Mr Wotton’s guilt. He was sentenced to six years with a non-parole period of two years. 

Sergeant Hurley beat him to death. No questions were asked. His parole condition would include that he would not be allowed to speak to the media and that he would go through to correctional meetings on Palm Island. A couple of years ago, he challenged the gag order in the High Court, but all three judges turned him away. It was a message to him and to Palm Islanders to not fight back, to forget about equality.

The inquests showed that the police covered their backs. Everyone knows that Hurley lied, that he said at one point to the inquest that he fell over but to the side (of Mulrunji) when in fact he beat him. The gash under (Mulrunji’s) eye contradicted Hurley’s testimonies – the injuries contradicted Hurley’s testimony.

“I did the wrong but I went to jail. I saw was what people endure in prison, and I felt some relief, in some sense, when parole ended and the gag order automatically was lifted.”

Mr Wotton said that his time in jail “was stressful but that the injustice I had to deal with. It was disappointing being in jail but what I saw was what people endure in prison, and prison makes it worse for them.”

“Prison is a bad place, there are no real programs, except when you come towards the end. The parole programs are about dates, not education or skills to help you get a job. They are not helping people while in prison.”

We discussed Mr Hurley and the Queensland Police but the following sums it all up.

We discussed First Nations leadership.

“Would not have mattered if they are Labor, Liberal or anyone, they all piss in each other’s pocket. The racism is the same, the lies are the same, the corruption, the way business is done, and the way people are mistreated are always the same. It doesn’t matter if it is Labor or Liberal, it is the same for our people.”

“People on Palm Island need so much more than we have. We should have the right to home ownership for instance.”

We discussed the then Queensland government.

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Ebola: world must wake up

Charlene Rodrigues

Four weeks ago, OB Sisay, a political and economic risk analyst specialising in Africa, returned to London from Sierra Leone. While in Kenema, the West African country’s southeastern province, he had witnessed the anxiety among locals emotionally devastated by the unfolding news of the deadly Ebola outbreak.

“There’s plenty of fear and confusion on the streets,” he says. “The level of understanding among the public is not great.”

The outbreak is said to be the deadliest since 1976. There have been nearly 900 deaths and at least 1,200 reported cases across Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

As he boarded his flight to London, Sisay was concerned about the lack of screening at airport entry, particularly in view of the fact that he was boarding an international flight leaving an area with such a high death toll. Similarly, on arrival in London, there was a dearth of spot symptom check-ups at Heathrow.

Sisay wrote to the UK’s Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies, pointing out the lack of safety procedures in both countries. He received a response two weeks later (in mid-July) reassuring him that there had been no reports of cases having been “exported” to countries outside of West Africa. Airport screenings, the letter implied, were “costly” and could be expected to have “limited impact” given that the virus has an incubation period of 21 days.

But after learning of the death of a US citizen in Nigeria who had travelled from Liberia, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond called for an emergency Cobra meeting (named Cobra after the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms, where the crisis response committee meets). It suddenly became clear that Ebola could travel to another country. Thanks to globalisation and air travel, the virus is not restricted to West Africa.

Contrary to the response from the Chief Medical Officer’s office, Immigration Service (ISU) General Secretary Lucy Moreton admitted that her members were not adequately equipped and said that more information was needed to bring the staff up to speed about the deadly virus.

Recently, the death of a 70-year-old Gambian woman at Gatwick sparked fears the disease had spread to Britain, but tests from the Department of Health proved negative.

Growing anguish

Sisay’s testimony reflects the growing anguish among medical and foreign policy professionals regarding the inertia of local governments to respond to affected areas, in addition to the inept security measures at London’s airports.

“There has been some sloveness,” says Mike Noyes, head of humanitarian response at ActionAid. “Mostly out of a valid wish to not create a level of fear and panic which would make the situation even harder to handle than it already is. We’re now seeing a few panic measures being introduced, with talk of enforced isolation of communities where there are cases.”

Since the first reported incident in Guinea in March, national governments and international organisations such as World Health Organisation (WHO) have underestimated the problem, according to Sisay. Only in the last week of July did Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf announce the closing of borders and Sierra Leone’s President Ernest Bai Koroma call for a public state of emergency.

“ActionAid doesn’t believe it is appropriate to stigmatise and criminalise people for being sick,” says Noyes, “so care has to be taken that people’s rights are respected, even at this time.”

Citizen journalists in Sierra Leone and Liberia have blamed the government’s poor awareness campaigns and the public’s lack of understanding (Ebola has similar symptoms to cholera and diarrhoea) for the low hospital admission rates.

Sisay says that people were cynical and reluctant to be admitted to hospital, for fear they would contract the virus there. Others were deeply suspicious and initially thought the virus was a hoax.

Tolbert Nyenswah, Assistant Minister for Health and Disease Prevention in Liberia, doesn’t believe that lack of awareness is the problem. “Based on the [high numbers] of people infected, we [understand] the gravity of the situation. If you tune into any radio station in Liberia, awareness is not a problem, but this has created fear among many people.”

According to Sisay, things could have been done differently: “Our people believe traditional medicine works where Western medicine fails, so to lead awareness-raising campaigns with the almost certain fatality of Ebola was a mistake. Emphasising the increased survival rates associated with early diagnosis and treatment and using initial survivors as ‘poster boys’ for the campaign would have been more effective.

“The WHO and national governments seem to have assumed that the outbreak would follow patterns similar to previous outbreaks and end after just a few months with little major spread outside the initial focal points. This ignored the relative geographical isolation of previous outbreaks, which is not the case in West Africa, where cross-border travel from outbreak locations is much higher,” he adds.

Two respected doctors – Samuel Bratton from Liberia and Sheik Humm Khan from Sierra Leone – have died in the outbreak. Two Americans, Kent Brantly, a doctor, and Nancy Writebol, from Christian aid group Samaritan’s Purse, continue to fight for their lives.

Citing health education as a top priority, Noyes believes there is a huge challenge in getting the message out to affected communities, and those at risk that Ebola is real and is a threat, and in channelling advice on how to prevent the spread and deal with suspected cases.

But he acknowledges it is hard. “Emotionally, some of the messages needed can be hard to accept,” he says.

Meanwhile, local governments are doing what they can to contain the spread. Aid agencies continue to appeal for funds and the World Bank announced this week that it is allocating US$200 million in emergency assistance. But with no sign of the death toll levelling off, many fear that the virus is spreading too fast, not only in Africa, but in other parts of the world, too. It will be a while before the people of West Africa can rid themselves of the deadly virus and start to live again.
Some US destabilising assaults against Cuba have become so much the norm that they are no longer news. These include economic blockade and travel restrictions. Others, however, like special covert actions, serve to restore US aggression to public awareness, especially when those covert acts are exposed or when they fail.

That’s the case with yet another revelation on intrusion in Cuban affairs by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). According to a recent Associated Press (AP) story, USAID hired Creative Associates International to research Cuba’s “opposition movement.” Documents obtained by AP show plans for building a “subscriber base [of] perhaps hundreds of thousands” for “reforming content.”

Eventually, “operators would introduce political content that would enable Cubans to organise ‘smart mobs’ – mass gatherings called at a moment’s notice that might trigger a Cuban Spring.” After two years and only 40,000 Cuban enrollees, the program ended.

Cuban analyst Iroel Sánchez asks: “Will the US government learn from these new failures or will its policies toward Cuba continue as a feast for the incompetent?” The revelations recall earlier US interventionist initiatives put in place after predominantly military and terrorist modes of engagement went out of fashion. Funnelling of millions of federal dollars to oppositionists in Cuba through Florida-based private and public agencies came to very little; funds were stolen or went astray and favoritism prevailed in selecting Cuban recipients. The con-victions as US mercenaries in 2003 of 75 and as recently as last month of 24 operators cast a pall over quiet US interventionist attempts, mainly because of video documentation of US payments shown at their trial.

Yet manipulation of social media continues. According to close observer Tracey Eaton, “The US government awarded an additional $400,000 to the Maryland company that designed and operated Piramideo, a social network aimed at sending millions of text messages to Cuba.” The Office of Cubacasting’s (OCB) “Financing in any form of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), responsible for the US Radio and TV Marti – broadcaster of propaganda to Cuba,” said the one-year contract with Washington Software on June 20.

The OCB, charged with shaping public opinion, is recruiting 12 young people from Peru, Costa Rica and Venezuela to pose as tourists in Cuba beginning in late 2010. Its purpose was to engage the region are devising mechanisms versus the Russian ruble rose to the highest on July 31 since the end of 2010, according to the Moscow Exchange.”

In March, after Crimea voted to secede from Ukraine and join Russia, the US and European Union imposed visa restrictions on Russians and Ukrainians whom they con-sidered “most directly involved in destabilizing Ukraine, including the military intervention in Crimea.”

America and the EU expanded their economic punishment later in the month, as well as twice in April, once in May and twice in July, according to Deloitte & Pimpflton, an international financial law firm. In the latest round of sanctions, imposed on July 29, the European Union imposed broader sanctions to “limit access to EU capital markets for Russian state-owned financial institutions, impose an embargo on trade in arms, establish an export ban for dual use goods for military end users and curtail Russian access to sensitive technologies particularly in the field of the oil sector.”

President Barack Obama announced the US would also be “blocking the exports of specific goods and technologies to the Russian energy sector,” “expanding sanctions to more banks” and “suspending credit that encourages exports to Russia.”

The dollar’s dominance has shrunk over the last 13 years, from 75 percent of global currency reserves to 61 percent today, threatening the position that the greenback held since the Bretton Woods Conference in July 1944, when deleg-ates from 44 Allied countries met in New Hampshire to hammer out a way to regulate the international monetary and financial order after the conclusion of World War II.

Each signatory agreed to adopt a monetary policy that maintained the exchange rate by tying its national currency to the US dollar and to prevent competitive devaluation of its money. At the time, the dollar was pegged to the price of gold. In 1971, President Richard Nixon took the US off the gold standard, and the American banknote became the reserve currency around the world. Certain commodities, like oil, are priced in US dollars, regardless of the country of origin. “The crisis created a rethink of the dollar-dominated world that we live in,” Joseph Quinlan, chief market strategist at Bank of America Corp.’s US Trust, which oversees about US$380 billion, told Evans. “This nasty turn between Russia and the West related to sanctions, that can be an accelerator toward a more multicurrency world.”

The wording of the economic penalties may also negatively impact the greenback’s standing as the world’s reserve currency. Historically, US sanctions prohibit companies from using US dollars in the targeted country (like Iran or Sudan). Frances Coppola wrote in Forbes in mid-July. But the present sanctions on Russia focus on “US persons” providing compa-nies with long-term financing in any currency. Some of the targeted busi-nesses include those in the energy industry, including Rosneb and Novatek, and those in the financial industry, like Gazprombank (the financial arm of gas giant Gazprom) and the Russian state development bank.

“It is perhaps not obvious why an energy company would want to borrow in Euros, since oil and gas are priced in dollars,” Coppola wrote. “But borrowing in Euros could be a way around the sanctions.”

Banks could also use derivatives “or even just basic foreign exchange facilities,” she added. But with the EU joining in on the sanctions, Euro funding may be “rather hard to come by.” But, Coppola noted, “It’s still clever.”
In demanding equality and freedom for all the residents of historic Palestine, it is the opponents of Israel, not its supporters, who carry the torch of history’s noble anti-racist struggles.

The old ones are always the best. That, at least, seems to be the thinking behind existing Western views, which are increasingly seeking to revive the claim that those appalled by Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians are all anti-Semites.

Corruption, inequality and tyranny are all as appalling as they are widespread, but human rights violations are constructed on the basis of racism particularly disturbing.

If Fidel Castro’s Spain and Senegal proceeded to construct a network of settlements with special privileges for French settlers while blockading those Spaniards who fought that state to restrict their access to food and building materials, it is not hard to imagine that the occupied and terrorized Palestinians would receive at least as much sympathy and support as is currently shown to the Palestinians.

If Israel is singled out, it is usually because people hate occupation because they hate Jews. If Israel’s friends want to query this singling out, they should ask why people are more disgusted by racism than by other injustices (which might be a reasonable question, but could hardly be more different from the question they currently ask).

Moreover, we in the West focus on Israel because our governments are implicated in its crimes. Israel is America’s outpost in the Middle East, a projection of the 19th-century belief that the children of 1948, Palestinian refugees, should be allowed to return home. In the exercise of national sovereignty. Those of us who demand an equal and common right to self-determination for all the inhabitants of the area regardless of their race, have been asked to put a stop to fascist terrorism.

Apartheid South Africa elicited a special public pressure to oppose the use of our country against the wrongdoings of Israel, not its supporters, who carry the torch of history’s noble anti-racist struggles.

The equivalent would be for Vladimir Putin to accuse those among us who oppose apartheid in South Africa of being Afrikaners who carry the torch of history’s noble anti-racist struggles.

History is not without parallels. Apartheid South Africa elicited a special public pressure to oppose the use of our country against the wrongdoings of Israel, not its supporters, who carry the torch of history’s noble anti-racist struggles.

This is less an argument than an emotional argument. Its intended effect is to render criticism of Israel socially unacceptable even as Amnesty International accuses it of deliberately targeting and killing children every hour in Gaza – providing the persecution of Jews.

“Lots of countries are awful. You single out Israel’s violence because you hate Jews”.

This often repeated claim is doubly flawed. First, it is simply untrue that the majority of those appalled by Israel’s attack on Gaza are LGBTQI+ rights of being driven by nothing but anti-Russian racism. Claims like this are significant because they shift the terms of debate – rather than asking whether Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians is justified, Israel’s supporters wish to place that question beyond the scope of public discussion. In order to defend human rights effectively, it is therefore important that we are all able to respond to these claims, which take two main forms: it is unfair to criticize Israel, because as citizens of a majority society, Jews are protected by citizenship law.

Secondly, Israel is sufficiently unique to justify a particular focus on its behaviour. Israel is no other country today premised on ethno-religious discrimination. In the West Bank and in its de facto occu- pation of Gaza need not be motivated by anti-Semitism, supporters of Israel often insist that taking offence at the crimes of 1948, rather than those of 1967, is not anti-Semitic. In fact, the above question suf- fers from historical amnesia. As recently as 1999, activists were opposing the principle of self-determination for another ethnic group – white South Africans. It is noteworthy that FW De Klerk’s defence of the principle of Apartheid has discriminated against; not because Afrikanders wanted only the national self-determination sought by Israeli Jews, he says. The cases are analogous because both peoples sought national rights based on disposessing another population.

Jewish self-determination in Palestine is therefore not compar- able to, say, the rights of people who live north of the English Channel to self-determination in a country called Britain. Rather, the hypothetical similar case would be if one section of the British population asserted a divine right to control part or all of the country, with a flag, an anthem and a constitution declaring the state to be the property of that group. It should come as no surprise that it would result in a race war.

In demanding equality and freedom for all the residents of historic Palestine, it is the opponents of Israel, not its supporters, who carry the torch of history’s noble anti-racist struggles.
Toxic water and remembering Tolpuddle

The ancient mariner was surrounded by water everywhere, “but not a drop to drink”. In Australia, the driest continent on earth, our problem is lack of water. But now our supply of drinking water is actually under attack.

Water is needed for drinking and also – importantly – for farming, so that we have food (meat, fruit, grain and vegetables) as well as water. But water-intensive industries like mining are acquiring and using our scarce water resources with potentially devastating results for food production. Water used in mining is not only diverted from agriculture but is polluted in the process that often it cannot successfully be re-used.

The farm-based anti-CSG organisation Lock the Gate has analysed the allocation of water licenses in NSW and discovered some worrying facts. The Rural Grapevine, to which I contribute, wrote:

‘The scourge of our economy is now zero hour contracts [where work is totally casualised]. Workers do not know until the Thursday what they are due to start work whether in fact they have any work.] In the 21st century workers have to phone up their employer in the morning to find out if they have work that day. Victorian practices are back in 2014.’

Rosie MacGregor, Chair of South West Labour, told the Sunday March rally that they were marching “against the background of austerity where we’ve seen rising housing costs, falling living standards and the emergence of food banks in one of the richest countries in the world, which is deplorable and unacceptable.”

Of course, Britain might be a rich country, as Ms MacGregor says, but that wealth is not in the hands of the working class who created it but in the hands of the capitalist class who expropriated it. For the benefits of that wealth to flow to the workers will require a complete change in the social system, a revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism. Only then will the aspirations of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and those who fought for them come to fruition.

Palestine: Exposing Israel’s western sponsors.

Like many people the world over I am deeply distressed with the continual, tragic conflict and carnage in Palestine. It is therefore desirable to read about more Israeli settlement building, the suppression of protests, arrests, beatings, detentions, killings and curfews and total lack of progress towards a just resolution.

Despite this bad news, a notable and welcome development is that even staunch allies like Australia and the USA are finally expressing mild criticism of the rogue state of Israel, in regards to the settlements, forgoing of passports and other matters. The recent actions by Israel and resulting bad publicity have exposed the true nature of the Israeli state to many more people around the world. This publicity has severely embarrassed and upset the USA and Israel’s other western allies. They don’t like such damaging exposure. This is because Israel could not occupy Arab land, build illegal settlements, break UN resolutions and international law, and kill and oppress the Palestinian Arab people without the consent and support of the countries like the USA and Australia.

The US in particular continues to provide the diplomatic, political, economic and massive military support to enable the Israeli war machine to operate. The US gives Israel over US$4 billion in direct aid each year and without it Israel could not sustain the military occupation of the Palestinian territories, or continually build new Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land.

In reality the USA and its allies are the key to resolving the conflict. It is virtually impossible to draw a clear line between the peoples, organisations and the governments of the world that seek and support justice for the Palestinians and peace in the region continue to increase the pressure on Israel’s western backers.

And it is vital that activists continue to expose the role that Australia, the USA and Britain play in condoning and sustaining the colonial settler state. This exposure greatly disturbs these governments.

And publicity of the plight of the Palestinian people and Israeli oppression hurts Israel’s image and prompts enormous pressure on Israel and its other supporters. To end this tragedy and achieve a viable and just solution let’s keep up this pressure.

Stepping up for Gaza

I was part of a delegation of activists from Jewish Voice for Peace and Jews Say No! who took over the Friends of the IDF headquartered in New York. Until we were arrested, we read the names and age of every soldier who had been killed in the conflict of mourning, often with voice breaking and tears rolling down our faces. We stood there for an hour, reading the names steadily, and still did not read them all.

As I was taken out in handcuffs to face a sea of about 30 police officers, I asked a staff member of the Friends of the IDF standing nearby, “Did you hear the names we read? Did you see that we read them for an hour and didn’t reach the end? Is this what you support? Are these the Jewish values you grew up with?”

As Jews, so many of us have been brought up on stories of our families’ lives hanging in the balance based on the courage of someone who had the choice to speak up or remain silent. We are in that kind of moment now. And that is why I, and so many other people like me, are taking action.

Dozens of our allies are coming together for a National Day of Action for Gaza. The climax of our hope I have in these very dark days comes from you – our members, supporters, and allies who are standing up all over the world.

In Washington, DC, Jewish Voice for Peace members, alongside members of CodePink, interrupted a pro-Israel conference while Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer was speaking. Despite being violently attacked, they continued their protest.

In Boston, over a thousand people, JVP and others have arrested and disliked all of them, rallied in front of the state house and blocked traffic for several hours.

In Chicago, five activists from JVP and ASFC were arrested protesting at Boeing, and in the Bay Area JVP ers conducted a die-in at HP to protest its profiting from Israel’s war crimes. Seattle members did the same at a Pike Place Market.

I could go on and on: protests in Ithaca; Portland, OR; Portland, ME; St Louis, Jersey City. There are more places than I can count, and more to come. Everywhere we – you – are getting our pro-peace, pro-justice, pro-equality message out. We are taking a stand.

As Jews, so many of us have been brought up on stories of our families’ lives hanging in the balance based on the courage of someone who had the choice to speak up or remain silent. We are in that kind of moment now. And that is why I, and so many other people like me, are taking action.

Rebecca Vilkomerson
Jewish Voice for Peace
The documentary screening in the Sunday Best slot this week is a British made piece of ultra-Right propaganda that is so extreme even some British reviewers found it hard to take. Its tone is set by the title: *Mad Dog: Inside The Secret World of Muammar Gaddafi* (ABC2 Sunday August 17 at 8.30pm).

“Mad Dog” was what that great democratic leader Ronald Reagan called him.

Gaddafi himself infuriated imperialist leaders by keeping his country’s vast oil reserves out of the hands of the giant oil cartels and using the income from oil not only to provide his people with health care and other benefits but to support anti-imperialist governments and movements around the world. Western leaders openly rejoiced when he was brutally murdered during NATO’s air-war and clandestine invasion under the cloak of an “uprising” that included a violent affiliate of Al-Qaeda and US, French and British special forces. Hillary Clinton gleefully told the media: “We came, we saw, he died.”

The film also includes a few who speak well of Gaddafi but they are set up to be disbelieved, like the “jovial German rocket scientist who lives with his wife on their own private island, and who was hired by Gaddafi to build missiles for him. The German says that Gaddafi had ‘no serious interest’ in developing nuclear weapons and that he ‘laughed at the idea’.”

Dyess-Nugent does seem to be spot on however when he comments that “At times, the point of the film might almost be that people will do their best to describe the James Bond villain they wish they’d meet.”

One thing that stands out is the recreation of actuality footage and interviews with various “accompliers and victims” of Gaddafi. One of the former is an ex-CIA operative named Frank Terpel who according to the film “ran Gaddafi’s Murder, Incorporated, killing his enemies worldwide.” He now lives in Cuba (according to the film “is now hiding out in Cuba”).

The film includes a few who speak well of Gaddafi but they are set up to be disbelieved, like the “jovial German rocket scientist who lives with his wife on their own private island, and who was hired by Gaddafi to build missiles for him. The German says that Gaddafi had ‘no serious interest’ in developing a nuclear program, though he may be the only person on Earth who believes this, if he does believe it.”

Dyess-Nugent’s comments seem very conventional.

One thing that stands out is the way socialism has been eradicated from the script. This is very noticeable, for one of the two anti-war figures that are featured is Vida Goldstein, a leader of the Australian Socialists, the prominent socialists party in NSW and one of the parties that in 1921 came together to form the Communist Party of Australia.

The other anti-war activist, Tom Barker, of the WW1, is portrayed making speeches under a banner bearing Marx’s slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” but too is termed a militant trade unionist with no mention of socialism, despite the importance of the socialist movement in the labour movement and the anti-war struggle before and during the War itself.

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Guardian
August 13, 2014

“A Letter to the Thing I Wish I Had Written”

A Letter to Australia’s history, 20 years from now

Julian Burnside

Once I was proud of my country.

In 1948, Australia played a leading role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We had a history of being a proud, decent, largely egalitarian country.

In 1998, something important and fundamental started to change. You need to see where this can lead.

Patrick was one of the two big stevedoring operations in Australia. They were caught out trying to create a non-union workforce in a dock in Sydney and never offered a convincing explanation. Peter Reith tried to help them, but with friends like that...

Then in April, on the Tuesday before Good Friday, a bunch of goons stormed the docks and kicked out all the workers who were members of the union. They had attack dogs to give them an advantage, and large gangs with balaclavas and no clothes who put up chains across the dock to keep the unionists out.

At the same time as the docks were being stormed, Patrick took steps to sack the entire unionised workforce and put the company into administration.

It turned out that the company had moved all its assets sideways into a new company without telling anyone, and the government had secretly helped it implement the plan.

It was a shock to learn that a Liberal government would conspire to break its own laws in an attempt to break the union movement: it’s not how patronising blue-bloods are meant to behave. But the Coalition argued all the way to court that it had secret power.

What was shocking was not only that the government won, but that a government was prepared to make the argument in the first place.

Then Kevin Rudd became leader of the Labor Party and won government in late 2007. He promised a better, more humane, policy concerning refugees. And he delivered it.

But then Tony Abbott became leader of the party which still called itself Liberal.

The Coalition government argued all the way to the High Court that a man who had not committed any offence and was not as a risk to anyone, who had been refused a visa but could not be removed from Australia because he was stateless, that this man could remain in detention for the rest of his life.

What was shocking was not only that the government won, but that a government was prepared to make the argument in the first place. The Coalition quickly showed their true colours when we learned that senior members of the new government had been robbing their parliamentary expenses. That was no surprise, but it was interesting to see that the new Attorney-General was involved. Haughty, supercilious, self-righteous George Brandis had elbowed his way to the trough with the best of them.

After all wasn’t Brandis the one who had ferociously attacked Peter Slipper for visiting a winery and charging the taxi ride to the Commonwealth? Brandis went to a friend’s wedding at a winery and charging the taxi ride to the Commonwealth? When he was found out two years later, Brandis repaid the Commonwealth.

What was shocking was not only that the government won, but that a government was prepared to make the argument in the first place.

How many of us, myself included, have lost our bearings; we are no longer attentive to the world in which we live; we don’t care; we don’t protect what God created for every one, and we end up unable even to care for one another? And when humanity as a whole loses its bearings, it results in tragedies like the one we have witnessed.

Jesuit-trained Tony Abbott and Pentecostal hypocrite Scott Morrison were unmoored.

The Coalition won the election. Australia lost.

Last of a talent when half its front bench followed Gillard out the door.

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After all wasn’t Brandis the one who had ferociously attacked Peter Slipper for visiting a winery and charging the taxi ride to the Commonwealth? Brandis went to a friend’s wedding and billed the Commonwealth. When he was found out two years later, Brandis repaid the $1,600 and said he had done nothing wrong.

Peter Slipper is still facing criminal charges for much less.

And Tony Abbott has billed the Commonwealth for every fun-run and lyrae cycle-fest, not to mention his Tamworth photo opportunity which apparently cost us about ten grand. Over the last couple of years he has had his hands in our pockets for about $3 million.

So here’s the problem. We have a corrupt, hard-right Coalition government, led by self-seeking hypocrites.

We have a weakened, right-wing Labor opposition unable, it seems, to restore decency.

And we have a country, once great, now seen as selfish, greedy and cruel and we have no political leadership at all.

We are redefining the character of our country. Most of us have not noticed because, for most of us, life is good.

The sight of the major parties competing to promise greater cruelty to boat people is new in Australian politics. We have never been perfect, but this was an obscenity without precedent.

It is painful to recognise that we are now a country which would brutalise one group with the intention that other people in distress will choose not to ask us for help.

But some of us remember how things once were; some of us see how things could be.

We will grieve until we find our way.

Recent History of Australia: when you are being written, please remember these things. A contribution from the People of Letters at Ubud Readers’ and Writers’ Festival

The Beacon

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