

This Average Kiwi Bloke Has Had Enough...

As an ordinary average Kiwi bloke watching the events of the past few days in Aotearoa from Canada, I have felt both a sense of déjà vu and strong parallels between the two places. My outrage at the actions of the New Zealand Police and their political masters, and the way in which media feeding-frenzies and sensationalism which has ensured that the words “terror” and “Maori” get bandied hysterically throughout the country and the globe, is tempered with a sense of how pathetically predictable this operation has been.

Predictable because the New Zealand state, built as it is on the dispossession of Maori and the continued colonization of Maori lands lives and resources has always inherently equated Maori resistance and decolonization initiatives with subversion, sedition and criminality. Perhaps especially so in Tuhoe, for whom this is yet another very real wave of armed invasion and occupation.

Predictable because in the past, when politicians and officials scoffed at critics who argued that new laws about ‘big important secret stuff’ that none of us could possibly fathom, like national security and “terror”, would be used against social justice activists and Maori sovereignty movements and lead to the criminalization of dissent and have a chilling effect on people’s rights to organize around issues of social and ecological injustice, the critics have usually been proven right. In early 1996 I wrote a submission on behalf of a New Zealand non-governmental organization opposing the proposed expansion of the definition of ‘security’ in the Security Intelligence Service (SIS) Amendment Act of that year, and became the victim of a spectacularly botched SIS break-in two weeks after the new law came in, notwithstanding the fact that it transpired that the original SIS warrant had been issued before the law change, which in turn had been the subject of similar criticism and protest when it came into effect in the 1970s. To top it off my house was searched a few days later by Police, supposedly looking for “bomb-making materials”. At the time, some people tried to politely suggest that they might have had better luck searching the SIS offices.

Predictable because, as I wrote in an opinion piece for the Otago Daily Times in December 2000, the public – particularly those engaged in organizations and movements for social justice - has plenty to fear from the so-called ‘criminal intelligence’ mindset of the NZ Police. This ordinary average Kiwi bloke’s mind boggles at the claims of NZ Police Association President Greg O’Connor that this week’s operation was based on ‘credible’ police intelligence, and his whingeing today about how frustrated police are about nonsense and half-truths about their operations.

I and many other social justice activists know a bit about how police criminal intelligence works. There’s a disturbing mindset and operational culture within parts of the police which frequently equates challenges to prevailing political and economic orthodoxies with criminal activity. While their operations relate partly to narcotics and vice, the police’s Criminal Intelligence Service (CIS) also monitors political activities which the police consider may involve a breach of the criminal law, though how such activities are assessed is anybody’s guess.

The service conducts similar surveillance operations to the Security Intelligence Service and there is strong liaison between them. The CIS falls outside of the definition of an intelligence agency which applies to the SIS and the Government Communications Security Bureau. For many years, the CIS has clearly granted itself a broad mandate to collect information on people on the basis of their political beliefs and sympathies, and views formed by police intelligence officers. Their work in this area seems to have much in common with political elements in police forces elsewhere in the world which routinely monitor, harass and criminalize legitimate political organizers and activities.

By deeming many groups and individuals as having a sufficient propensity to commit criminal offences on the basis of their perceived political views and affiliations, the CIS is contributing towards the criminalization of dissent in New Zealand. In turn, this encourages front line police to exercise contempt and a cavalier disregard towards people's rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. In May 2000, two dozen unions, academics, religious and political leaders called on the justice and electoral select committee to hold an inquiry in to the CIS's role in targeting political organizations and activists. Predictably, this call went unanswered. Maybe it needs to be restated even more forcefully now.

Predictable because some, like Greenpeace New Zealand in an appallingly self-serving and craven media release this week, want to play a game of good activist/bad activist, instead of joining those already asking hard questions of the government for bringing in draconian legislation which might have implications for their own work if they were able to see past the ends of their own noses. The fishing expeditions that the police are conducting through their surveillance, raids and interrogations will result in more ammunition for more attacks on those who dare to dissent in Aotearoa/New Zealand. But instead of dampening dissent, now is surely a time to tell the squawking know-it-all parrots of O'Connor's ilk to put up or shut up. And for people to take a long hard look at New Zealand's claims to be a democracy. Because, frankly, if they can do this to Tame Iti, they can do it to you. I'm reminded of a text attributed to Martin Niemoller, after World War II:

First they came for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up,
because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me,
and by that time there was no one
left to speak up for me.

'Credible' police intelligence. Let's see. Hmmm. In my experience that often means half-baked notions framed by a mindset that equates activism with criminality, and in a country so based on denial of its colonial reality, Maori advocating for self-determination have always been labelled as extremists. Along comes 9/11 and there is a whole new pretext for surveillance of domestic dissent. After all, with the Cold War gone, state security agencies, including the police, had to find some new enemies within to justify their budgets and new toys. Technology in the hands of the police is a bit of a worry. Especially the intelligence types. After all in 2003, the National Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, in its threat assessment of Ahmed Zaoui, drew "evidence" from a cult website of a convicted fraudster Lyndon Larouche which claimed that Mr Zaoui had links with a terrorist organization. Credible? Yeah right! If they cannot distinguish between lawful political activity and criminal activity in the real world, they clearly cannot be trusted to do so in cyberspace. When police raided my house shortly after the illegal 1996 SIS break-in, which the Police's own Criminal Intelligence Service struggled unsuccessfully to cover up, its stellar intelligence service had me down as being away at an SPCA conference, (an organization that I have had no dealings with, although I admit that it is possible that a reliable police source such as a stray cat pissing on the front of my section when they were watching my house may have led them astray) when I was on a publicly announced and promoted speaking tour against APEC and free trade, and being a

known associate of some guy I had never even heard of. These were known facts – “credible intelligence”. Nonsense – and not even half-truths!

This average Kiwi bloke also fondly remembers viewing a police training video from the 1995 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting which segued peaceful demonstrations by Maori and Pakeha alike with bomb blasts, and showed a senior police intelligence officer with a pile of social justice organization publications as the video mischievously conflated political activism with terrorism. It would have been laughable if I did not appreciate the human consequences of this mindset being let loose on Aotearoa, over and over and over again. Pub gossip, innuendo and guilt by association and loony “two + two make five” conspiracy theories are a stock-in-trade for police intelligence work when it comes to dealing with political activists in Aotearoa. Police intelligence deserves to be treated more as an oxymoron than a holy cow.

But now all you need to do is to flop out national security and terror (practice saying that in front of a mirror – “terr-or”, “terr-or”. Now try “Maori terr-or”. Got it? No questions, please. Just believe.) and everyone is supposed to throw up their hands at the utterance of these mantras before bowing down before them as their idols. Not so the judges in my Court of Appeal case against the Attorney-General which found that the NZSIS had broken the law when they broke into my house in 1996. And when I later saw some of the documents that had initially been declared so prejudicial to ‘national security’ that they could not even be viewed by the court, especially the page from the Christchurch streetmap with an arrow and street number pointing to my house, I thought instantly how the whole nation must be imperiled by the sales of such streetmaps at dairies, bookstores and garages across the country. Security Intelligence. National Security. Criminal Intelligence. Try saying these words in front of a mirror, too. Repeatedly. With feeling. OK, that’s enough. You’ve reached nirvana already.

Last Sunday I was in my office, listening to Tame Iti’s voice on the song “Moko” by Moana and the Moahunters. Next morning, I had emails from friends in Aotearoa telling me about the invasion of Tuhoe by paramilitary police, the arrests and demonization of Maori that was spreading through the media virtually unchallenged. I thought of the parallels to past incursions against Tuhoe who have long resisted colonization, from the nineteenth century to Rua Kenana’s time, who have suffered land confiscation and previous invasions by units of armed police such as in 1916 when Rua’s son and another were shot dead. I was thinking of Tame and his whanau, and many others affected by this. I was also thinking about the cynical timing of the operation – already using a recent so-called anti-terror law as a pretext, and giving extra impetus to the Terrorism Suppression Amendment Bill now before Parliament. I was thinking about smear campaigns against social justice activists, Maori and non-Maori alike of the past, and how easy it is to throw mud in a small country, however unsubstantiated and plainly false allegations might be. I was thinking of a police force whose reputation after a series of shocking rapes, sexual assaults and cover-ups by police officers has been dented in the eyes of many New Zealanders. Of the benefits for a government to let the muscle of its freemarket model flex aggressively, and literally and figuratively unleash its dogs to warn those who would dare challenge the status quo. Of how a government led by a party that wrought the most radical neoliberal reforms (read deforms) in any OECD country seems to think that it can act against the Tuhoe people and other social and environmental activists with impunity. And how some will rush to believe whatever the government or the media tells them, without a critical frame of analysis for examining what is going on. These are the days too, when the conspiracy theorists in the New Zealand police intelligence service who trawl such erudite online resources as Larouche’s website (perhaps some are true believers), and various wingnuts and who claim to know the “real deal” from within the ‘activist world’ converge to feed the racialized hysteria.

And then, there’s an election coming up. Just like John Howard across the Tasman, who habitually campaigns on racist get-tough policies against Indigenous Australians (especially 1998 and this

election – maybe his outrageous militarization of Indigenous communities in Northern Territory in the name of child welfare gave Helen some ideas), refugees (2001) and the war on Iraq/”war on terror” (2004 and this year), someone in the Clark government must hope that this macho demonstration of state power being unleashed against Indigenous Peoples who have the temerity to believe in rights to self-determination and decolonization will play out well for them in the polls. A nice kick in the guts for all those Maori who stood up to the government’s deeply colonial foreshore and seabed legislation/legislated landgrab. It’s quite literally, as the Gaza-ization of Ruatoki and the treatment of those arrested and harassed shows, a case of putting a gun to their heads, and telling them to remain silent. In light of all of the disingenuous calls for cool heads by politicians in the past couple of days, perhaps we should be more worried about the chilling effect this operation will have on people who advocate for social justice, and healthy political debate.

But I also thought about parallels between Aotearoa/New Zealand and here in Canada, whose government also likes to parade itself on the world stage proclaiming how good it is to “its” Indigenous Peoples, and yet which has a history of staunch opposition to assertions of Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination and repressive militarized operations against Indigenous Sovereignty activists and state security agencies that construct “Aboriginal extremism” as a domestic terrorist threat, long before 9/11, and long after 1492. A few hours ago, I heard Sue Collis speak, the wife of Tyendinaga Mohawk activist Shawn Brant, who has been demonized in much of the Canadian media and criminalized by the state for his consistent stand for Indigenous sovereignty, see <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=30&ItemID=13830> for more background. Ironically CN Rail, which is suing Shawn, (currently on bail pending trial sometime next year), and several other Tyendinaga community members after a blockade of the railway line that runs through Tyendinaga (on Mohawk lands), once owned a 24% stake in Tranz Rail, the privatized railway corporation of New Zealand. I can’t help thinking of the parallels to what is happening to Tame Iti, a man I have known for many years, with whom I have cooked, shared meals, and laughs on many occasions and who clearly has the respect of his community for the work that he does, which we rarely hear about in mainstream media. Equally, I have just learnt that Canadian Minister of “Public Safety”, Stockwell Day is expected to introduce new security certificate legislation in Parliament any day now, which, if it succeeds, will further entrench the use of secrecy and racial profiling in the Canadian legal system.

There’s nothing “postcolonial” about the era that we live in. This week’s actions clearly illustrate that the governments of colonial settler states, like leopards, don’t change their spots, but just stalk their prey in other ways, to paraphrase a Ngati Kahungunu/Ngati Porou friend. Non-Maori have a responsibility to challenge the New Zealand government’s actions now and in the future, and if they don’t know it already, to learn the real history of not only the Tuhoe people and their territory, but also the history of colonization in Aotearoa. New Zealand has announced its candidacy for the UN Human Rights Council, for the period 2009-2012. This government, which has (along with Canada) voted against the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and is now waging a militarized campaign against Maori sovereignty, environmental and social justice activists clearly has no shame.

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**For more commentary on this topic, go to the NZ "terrorism" in perspective page
<http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/nzterror.htm>**