

If you aren't worried about the AFP raids on Aussie journalists, you should be

by Waleed Aly via jaxie - SMH Wednesday, Jun 5 2019, 10:14pm
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How many Australian citizens are worried about the fact that the Australian Federal Police (AFP) has spent a good portion of this week raiding journalists who have published stories that are clearly in the public interest. This isn't a rhetorical point, by the way. I'd really like to know, because I suspect that if the entire nation were gathered in a room, there would be very few hands raised.



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I suspect this because I see a public culture that has systematically become less and less interested in the very idea of excessive state power. Thanks to a cravenly bipartisan political scene and a media landscape increasingly without the resources or inclination to scrutinise dull legislation, there's almost no public debate of anything that can be vacuumed up under the heading of "national security".

It's the least demanding, most invincible justification in our public life. And that's possibly why the federal police used it - without elaboration - to [defend its raid](#) on News Corp's Annika Smethurst. Smethurst had published a story revealing a plan for the Australian Signals Directorate [military intelligence unit] to spy on Australian citizens directly by hacking into critical infrastructure without a warrant -- Australia is not America!. The story was strongly denied at the time. Now it is the basis of a raid. We're simply not told how it compromises our national security to learn of such things. The same might be said of the [ABC story](#) that triggered the other raid, which revealed how Australian special forces in Afghanistan allegedly killed civilians and covered it up.

News Corp was having none of it, attacking the raid as a "dangerous act of intimidation" that expressed "the willingness of governments to undermine the Australian public's right to know". And given that these stories were more than a year old, and that the raids were timed in the immediate aftermath of an election when the price of any scandal is likely to be minimised, that might be true. But it's bound to ring hollow because it implies that sometimes police use their powers for political

ends, rather than legitimate policing ones. And that's an idea we've been trained to reject instinctively.

This all follows years of News Corp's championing of radically expanded counter-terrorism measures, attacking those who criticise them as "soft on terror", or waving through other apparently political raids such as those done on Labor staffers' offices at the behest of NBN Co. It follows an established political pattern of the Coalition proposing ever-expanding security powers and the Labor party signing up as quickly as possible with barely any public scrutiny, even passing laws it accepts are flawed to avoid being attacked on national security grounds. The result over the course of this century has been that any desire to scrutinise things done in the name of national security has been cast as opposition to national security itself. Ours is an era in which cliches like "better safe than sorry" or "if you've done nothing wrong you have nothing to fear" are actually good enough.

According to last year's Essential survey, the federal police is now the most trusted institution in the country. More than the High Court, the Reserve Bank, or importantly, those institutions raided this week. State police come in second. That our most trusted institutions are also among our most opaque tells us that we no longer place a premium on notions like accountability. We now have a militarised, security-based culture in which we presume the organisations that wield hard power do so appropriately. Being intimidated? Seems the public mood is that you probably deserve to be.

It's a failure of civil reasoning that has delivered us here. When a security agency asks for expanded powers (or "tools" as the euphemism goes), that should be the beginning of a conversation, not its end. At that point the question isn't simply "how useful will police find these powers?". It's also, "In what way is it possible for these powers to be abused?" It's true, the media will occasionally ask such questions, but mostly when it sees the potential for that power to be used against itself. If, instead, the power in question falls upon a terrorism suspect barely a ripple of dissent is visible until at least after the fact, no matter how many Mohamed Haneef or Kamer Nizamdeen stories we hear of people wrongly arrested. The latter, you might recall, News Corp's Daily Telegraph called a "poster boy for terrorism" in a headline before the police dropped the charges and had to apologise.

If we'd built a more civically minded culture we would not be having debates about, say, whether Julian Assange is a nice guy, or whether what he does is responsible journalism. We would instead be asking whether the basic elements of the crime he's alleged to have committed against America - encouraging a whistleblower to disclose classified information - are the same basic elements of so much investigative journalism. The point is not Julian Assange. The point is the way the crime is framed - not the alleged criminal, but the things being criminalised. Just as the point is not whether the person being raided is a journalist or a citizen, but the extent to which those powers are ripe for abuse. If the only freedom you care about is freedom of the press, soon enough that will fold too because you've created a culture that's insensitive to civil ideals.

Perhaps we've spent so long framing public debates as personality contests and culture wars - focusing on whether we like the people aggrieved or what they represent - that we've forgotten how to make them about abstract but fundamental ideas like the limits on state power. The problem with all that is eventually the only good guys left in the public imagination are the ones with that power and the capacity to abuse it. And at that point, you can complain all you like, but you can't expect there to be anyone left to hear it.

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Also see:

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/51724.htm>

[Well Waleed, it seems you have finally accepted the responsibility of your profession to protect the public interest and hold those that threaten it accountable, congratz -- better late than never. If the mainstream herd of lackey journos also accepted their professional responsibility then the public would do the rest and Australia, unlike oppressed police state America, would preserve its precious, hard won freedoms and liberties. And we all know that no assistance would be provided by our servile governments. Keep up the good work. And as for the spineless rest that toe Washington's line, go to hell, you despicable, gutless traitors.]

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