ORWELL'S NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR 20 YEARS ON
'The war on terrorism', 'doublethink' and 'Big Brother'

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Regrettably, one important anniversary passed last year with little attention. It was 20 years since 1984, the year immortalised by George Orwell. His dystopian vision has proven prescient. There is no other way to describe adequately the indefinite ‘war on terror’ proclaimed by the Bush administration, joined by many governments in the world, other than as Orwellian. Features conjured up by Orwell — doublethink, thought crimes, guilt by association and ‘Big Brother is watching’ — seem to be present. Under the banners of ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, invasions have been launched while, domestically, unprecedented state surveillance has been authorised. Insidiously, the ‘war’ has provided a blanket under which many aspects of the totalitarianism postulated by Orwell have been introduced, often extended and made permanent fixtures of the legal system. Measures that would have been unthinkable to many people two decades ago are becoming the norm.

It is worth noting at the outset that Orwell located his dystopia in Oceania, the evolution of an Anglo-American Alliance. Despite criticisms from civil liberties groups, both the British and American governments have introduced severe anti-terrorism measures, including detention without trial and proscription of organisations. To no avail, Amnesty International has condemned the Bush administration for breaching the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other international protocols against arbitrary detention and inhuman treatment of prisoners. In Australia, as reviewed below, the Howard government and the Labor Party opposition have combined to introduce secret interrogation and detention without trial, and prescribe lengthy jail terms for refusing to disclose information (which can include ideas) requested by the security authorities. They have also outlawed ‘association’ with a member or supporter of a proscribed terrorist organisation. Those detained or questioned are prohibited from informing their supporter of a proscribed terrorist organisation. Those evidence that they are forbidden to view or hear.

Further draconian measures have been placed on the political and legal agenda. Like its British and American counterparts, the Australian government has seized upon the July 2005 terrorist bombings in London to foreshadow another expansion of police-state powers. Prime Minister John Howard has spoken of the inadequacy of ‘19th century’ laws to combat 21st century terror. He has advocated the widespread installation of surveillance cameras and suggested the introduction of identity cards. Attorney General Philip Ruddock has called for a review of the anti-terrorism legislation, which would consider proposals such as outlawing views that endorse terrorism and stripping citizenship from foreign-born Australians suspected of links to terrorism.

These developments appear to be deeply Orwellian in a double sense. In the first place, they resemble the doctrine of ‘doublethink’, which insists that one must suppress one’s memory of the past in order to embrace a new ‘reality’ — including the nostrum that ‘everything changed’ with the events of September 11, 2001. Secondly, they embody the ‘Big Brother is watching’ regime in which ‘Thoughtcrime is death’.

The war on terrorism: ‘doublethink’ in action

In many ways, much of the language employed in the current ‘war’ is eerily reminiscent of Winston Smith’s explorations of the wonders of doublethink in Nineteen Eighty-Four:

The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed — if all records told the same tale — then the lie passed into history and became truth. ‘Who commands the past,’ ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.’

Under George W Bush’s doctrine, the ‘war on terror’ is an endless state of war on an abstract concept. ‘Terrorism’ is not a tangible enemy, nor even an ideological or political cause. It is, at most, a set of tactics, to which resort can be had by a multitude of disoriented and disaffected political currents. Moreover, the classification is susceptible to abuse for political purposes. Today’s primary ‘terrorist’ targets — al-Qa’ida-linked groups — were yesterday’s ‘freedom fighters’ in the guerilla war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. One must suspend all recall of the billions of dollars siphoned into Osama bin Laden’s Islamic fundamentalist movement by the administrations of Carter, Reagan and George Bush Senior until as recently as the early 1990s. Likewise, one’s knowledge that Saddam Hussein was also once a close ally of Washington, particularly during...
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Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell
detention without trial, as the US Supreme Court, by a 6–3 majority, commented in June 2004, in ruling that Guantanamo Bay detainees could seek writs of habeas corpus in US courts. The majority judgment, delivered by Stevens J, suggested that at stake were democratic conceptions dating back nearly 800 years to the Magna Carta of 1215:

Executive imprisonment has been considered oppressive and lawless since John, at Runnymede, pledged that no free man should be imprisoned, dispossessed, outlawed, or exiled save by the judgment of his peers or by the law of the land. The judges of England developed the writ of habeas corpus largely to preserve these immunities from executive restraint.18

Likewise, in A & Ors v Secretary of State for the Home Department,17 a decision of the British House of Lords, Lord Bingham referred to

[The long libertarian tradition of English law, dating back to chapter 39 of Magna Carta 1215, given effect in the ancient remedy of habeas corpus, declared in the Petition of Right 1628, upheld in a series of landmark decisions down the centuries and embodied in the substance and procedure of the law to our own day.]18

Controversially, the House of Lords ordered the release of eight individuals who had been certified and detained for more than two years under the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 (UK).

The 'counter-terrorism' laws: Big Brother is watching

Let us now turn to the second aspect of Orwellianism to observe how far these protections against tyranny have been subverted in the name of human security. Life in Oceania was dominated by posters featuring the handsome, moustachioed face of a dictator. "It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.19 Regular police patrols, snooping into people's windows, were not the primary threat to freedom of political thought. 'Only the Thought Police mattered,' because every whispered conversation could be detected by a telescreen.20 Winston Smith wrote: 'Thoughtcrime does not entail death: thoughtcrime IS death.'21 Those suspected of harbouring opposing thoughts routinely disappeared without any official explanation.

At first light, it may seem an exaggeration to assert that similar processes are under way in today's political and legal climate. Thankfully, we do not have ubiquitous posters of government leaders, figuratively watching our every move. But it is instructive to review four essential features of the raft of 'counter-terrorism' legislation passed, with the Labor Party's support, over the past three years. The legislation (1) defines terrorism in sweeping terms; (2) permits the banning of political groups; (3) allows for detention without trial; and (4) shrouds the operations of the intelligence and police agencies in secrecy and provides for semi-secret trials.22

As defined by these measures, terrorism extends to acts or threats that advance 'a political, religious or ideological cause' for the purpose of 'coercing or influencing by intimidation' any government or section of the public. It is punishable by life imprisonment. 'Advocacy, protest, dissent or industrial action' is exempted but not if it involves harm to a person, 'serious damage' to property, 'serious risk' to public health or safety, or 'serious interference' with an information, telecommunications, financial, essential services or transport system.23

This definition could cover any demonstration or strike action in which a person was injured or felt endangered, given that the purpose of many protests and strikes is to apply pressure to a government, employer or other authority. Nurses taking strike action that shuts down hospital wards in support of a political demand for greater health spending, for example, could be accused of endangering public health and thus be charged as terrorists. Demonstrators who block roads or entrances to government buildings or financial institutions, such as the stock exchange, could be charged as terrorists, as could computer hackers.

Terrorist intent is not necessary. The legislation imposes jail terms ranging from life to 10 years for preparing, planning or training for 'terrorist acts' and for possessing documents or other objects used in the preparation of such acts. A person can be jailed for possessing such a 'thing' even if they did not know it was used for terrorist purposes, but was merely 'reckless' as to that fact.

Organisations can be outlawed as terrorist by purely executive decision — via regulations — under amendments passed in 2004. Any person who directs or provides support to the activities of a terrorist organisation, knowing it to be terrorist, can be jailed for 25 years or, if they are 'reckless' as to whether the organisation is terrorist or not, for 15 years. A member of a banned group faces up to 10 years imprisonment. Membership is defined to include 'informal
Oceania's three central slogans were: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery and Ignorance is Strength...Today's slogans could be War is Security, Invasion is Liberation, and the Free Market is Freedom.

membership' or taking 'steps to become a member'. It is a defence to have taken 'reasonable steps' to cease membership 'as soon as practicable' after knowing the organisation was terrorist, but the burden of proof lies on the defendant. If current prosecutions are any guide, these provisions may be applied retrospectively against individuals who are linked to organisations that were only subsequently designated as terrorist.24 Under further amendments passed in 2004, anyone can be jailed for three years for simply knowingly 'associating' with a member of, or a person who promotes the church presented a possible threat to


Moreover, the High Court has, in effect, refused to call into question ASIO's assessment of what constitutes a threat to security. In 1982, in Church of Scientology v Woodward25 the court rejected an attempt by the Church of Scientology to challenge ASIO's assessment that the church presented a possible threat to security. A similar result was reached two years later in A v Hayden,26 with regard to the operations of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), ASIO's overseas sister agency.27 ASIO and ASIS are part of an extensive security and intelligence network, which includes the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), the Office of National Assessments (ONA) and special state police units (formerly called Special Branches).

The potential for the security agencies to act as a law unto themselves has been increased by the passage in late 2004 of the National Security Information (Criminal Proceedings) Act, which permits trials to be held in complete or partial secrecy. Closed court sessions can hear charges, censor evidence, allow government witnesses to testify in disguise via video and, in some circumstances, exclude defendants and their lawyers from trial proceedings. To activate the process, the Attorney General simply has to issue a certificate.
stating that evidence given in the trial is likely to 'prejudice national security'. If the judge agrees, lawyers who refuse or fail to obtain an Attorney General’s Department security clearance can be barred, possibly leaving the accused unrepresented.33

Taken together, with their four principal features of concern outlined above, the measures introduced since 2001 represent a chilling advance toward a ‘big brother’ state. As in Oceania, surveillance can be pervasive; detention and interrogation can be secretly undertaken on vague grounds; and people can be convicted and imprisoned, perhaps for life (possibly after semi-secret trials) for allegedly possessing ‘information’ deemed relevant to terrorism, even if no terrorist activity has taken place.

Orwell and the purposes of war

Among the most thought-provoking sections of Nineteen Eighty-Four is the extract from the mythical Emmanuel Goldstein’s banned work, The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism, which falls into the hands of Winston Smith. It includes an analysis of the continuous state of war undertaken between Oceania and its two super-state rivals, Eurasia and Eastasia, each of which had become unconquerable. The Orwell/Goldstein account suggests that this climate of war was inextricably bound up with the maintenance of a domestic police-state. Goldstein writes:

War, it will be seen, is now a purely internal affair. In the past, the ruling groups of all countries, although they might recognise their common interests and therefore limit the destructiveness of war, did fight against one another, and the victor always plundered the vanquished. In our own day they are not fighting against one another at all. The war is waged by each ruling group against its own subjects, and the object of the war is to make or prevent conquests of territory, but to keep the structure of society intact. The very word ‘war’, therefore, has become misleading. It would probably be accurate to say that by becoming continuous war has ceased to exist.33

In Goldstein/Orwell’s vision, a state of perpetual war had arisen, not primarily driven by external threats but the requirements of domestic political control. While the ruling elites maintained the ‘war’ in the name of combating foreign enemies, their actual targets were their own subjects. Indeed, continuous war had become necessary to ensure the political survival of their regimes. For all the apparent supremacy and omnipresence of the ruling groups, they operated with a siege mentality, constantly fearing the outbreak of mass discontent. As the source of the brooding popular hostility, Goldstein pointed to the existence of stark social inequality, which could not be overcome without generating new, even more dangerous, contradictions.

For if leisure and security were enjoyed by all alike, the great mass of human beings who are normally stupefied by poverty would become literate and would learn to think for themselves; and when once they had done this, they would sooner or later realize that the privileged minority had no function, and they would sweep it away. In the long run, a hierarchical society was only possible on a basis of poverty and ignorance… If human equality is to be for ever averted — if the High, as we have called them, are to keep their places permanently — then the prevailing mental condition must be controlled insanity.34

The collapse of the falsifications used to justify the United States-led invasion of Iraq — ‘weapons of mass destruction’, and Saddam Hussein’s supposed links to terrorism — have underscored the magnitude of the lies told to divert attention away from the real motives of the ‘war on terror’, both domestically and internationally. In terms of external motives, the Middle East and Central Asia, as is well known, contain the largest proven concentrations of oil and natural gas reserves in the world.

Domestically, there is no more justification to believe the official script that the same governments are
In effect, these measures can outlaw political campaigns against arbitrary or illegal detentions.

concerned with protecting ordinary people from terrorism. Rather, there are good reasons to conclude that political considerations, notably the need to provide an overseas distraction from the growth of social discontent, loom large in today’s political calculations, as they did for Big Brother. Even the inequality and social stratification described by Orwell/Goldstein pales by comparison with today’s worsening chasm between the wealthy elites and the remainder of society, of which there is ample evidence. According to the 2003 rich list published by Forbes magazine in early 2004, for example, the total net worth of the world’s billionaires added up to a staggering $1.9 trillion, equal to almost one fifth of the giant US economy. The world’s mega-rich grew even richer over the previous year as their stock portfolios swelled, catapulting the total number of billionaires to a record 587.

Within Australia also, the evidence points to a widening gulf in wealth as well as income. Levels, patterns and trends of Australian household saving, a report by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) found that in June 2002, the top 20% of households owned more than half the total household wealth. The poorest 20% of households possessed almost nothing, while the bottom 40% owned just 8% of total household wealth. Significantly, after a decade of privatisation, the wealthiest group owned almost 90% of all shares.

With society deeply divided between an oligarchy of the fabulously wealthy and the masses of ordinary people struggling to pay their bills, it is increasingly difficult, as Orwell suggested, to maintain democratic forms of rule. War provides both a diversion from the hostility provoked by this polarisation and a means of strengthening the domestic apparatus for intimidating and suppressing dissent.

Among some commentators, Nineteen Eighty-Four is taken as a parable for the Soviet Union, with Big Brother personifying Joseph Stalin and Goldstein representing Trotsky’s voice in the Stalinist wilderness. But as Thomas Pynchon observes in his introduction to the 2003 edition, Orwell regarded his work as written against all forms of totalitarianism, including those found within the official ‘socialism’ of the post-World War II Labour government in Britain. After all, Oceania, with its Ingsoc (English socialism) political order was a future projection of the Anglo-American Alliance, whereas Eurasia rested on Russian rule over the Eurasian landmass and Eastasia on Japanese hegemony over East Asia.

Although Nineteen Eighty-Four, like Orwell’s Animal Farm, was treated as an anti-communist tract during the Cold War, Orwell considered himself a ‘dissident left’ and once identified, to a certain extent, with groups such as the Spanish POUM and the British Independent Labour Party that espoused socialism. His novels were intended as forewarnings of the tendencies that Orwell saw as imminent in the capitalist world as well as the degenerated Soviet Union. Yet, for all its bleakness, Nineteen Eighty-Four ends with an appendix that refers to Newspeak in the past tense, suggesting its demise before it was supposed to become general by 2050. Perhaps it points to the future prospect of a genuinely democratic, egalitarian and fraternal society after the success of a social revolution from below. Properly understood, Orwell’s masterpiece can help inform such a movement that will consign the official edifices of lies, half-truths and perversions to the historical past.

Postscript

The concerns raised in this article have been heightened by the outcome of the September 27, 2005 Council of Australian Governments ‘counter-terrorism summit’. The eight state and territory leaders agreed with Prime Minister John Howard on a package of legislation that goes well beyond the already deep inroads made into essential civil liberties under the fraudulent banner of the ‘war on terrorism’.

The unprecedented measures are truly Orwellian. They directly target fundamental democratic rights: the freedoms of speech, association and movement, and the right not to be detained without trial. In secret hearings, the Australian Federal Police will be able to apply for 12-month control orders imposing draconian conditions on individuals, such as house arrest, tracking devices, travel bans and association restrictions, simply because the security agencies accuse them of being ‘terrorist risks’.

‘Preventative detention’ powers will enable the police to lock people away for up to 14 days without trial. Prisoners will be held not because they are accused of committing any offence, or even alleged to have ‘information’ relevant to terrorism (as with ASIO’s already unprecedented detention power, established

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38. Orwell, above n 6, xxii–xxv.