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The Example of the Commonwealth Parliament*

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**The new terrorism - the parliamentary response - the example of the
Commonwealth Parliament**

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Introduction

It has become a cliché to say that the world changed on 11 September 2001 with the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. While it may seem a cliché, for those involved in protective security of major public buildings such as the Commonwealth Parliament, the change in the security environment is dramatic and real. The terrorists attacks in Bali in October 2002 have reinforced and brought home most directly, that the change is fundamental.

In this paper I will describe the way in which the security environment has changed. I will contrast what is being called the 'new terrorism' with terrorism as it had previously been understood. I will indicate how the new terrorism has changed fundamentally the way the security of parliaments is now viewed. I will use the specific example of Parliament House in Canberra to show the response that is being made to the new security threat.

However, the implementation of the new security measures has not been all smooth sailing. Everything that happens at Parliament House is subject to intense scrutiny, both by members of Parliament and by the media. One of the challenges in providing security in a parliamentary building in a democratic country is achieving a balance between responding to a heightened security threat whilst ensuring the Parliament remains as open and accessible as possible. As I will note, this challenge is made particularly difficult where your every action is subject to analysis and scrutiny by the media. It is essential within the parliamentary environment to communicate what it is you are trying to achieve.

The ‘new terrorism’

Commentators and experts on terrorism have considered that the terrorist attacks such as those in New York and Bali, and other places, are sufficiently different from the terrorism which we have seen previously to describe the phenomenon as the ‘new terrorism’.

The key characteristics of the ‘old terrorist’ groups such as the Japanese Red Army, the Red Army Faction, the Irish Republican Army and the Moro National Liberation Front have been identified as:

- having motivations generally confined to national or local regional concerns. They normally sought some specific government concession, such as a degree of regional autonomy and were rarely driven by a strong religious ideology;
- generally used violence to gain attention, not to generate large body counts;
- generally had predictable organisational and financial arrangements; and
- usually behaved as ‘rational’ political actors in order to extract specific concessions from the authorities.¹

The characteristics of the ‘old terrorism’ meant that it tended to be confined to those nations or regions that were involved, any incidents were likely to be reasonably manageable and there was a political agenda that could be addressed to ameliorate the concerns (and hence the impact) of the terrorist groups.

For Australia, this meant that terrorism (despite the Hilton bombing in 1979) generally was not a major issue. And for the Commonwealth Parliament, a terrorist incident was not something specifically that our security forces and system were set up to counter. Our security capacity was directed towards dealing with protests both outside and within the building, dealing with individuals who sought to interfere with the proceedings of the Houses or to interfere with Members and assist in preventing theft in the building.

¹ Address by Professor Ross Babbage to the Australian Security in the 21st Century Seminar Series entitled ‘The New Terrorism - Implications for Asia Pacific Governance, Parliament House, Canberra, 11 December 2002.

By contrast, the characteristics of the 'new terrorism' demonstrate its very different nature:

- generally favour targets with a high symbolic value;
- have a broad international focus and are largely indifferent to local constituencies - religious ideologies frequently an element;
- there is an active effort to inflict mass casualties and to generate fear and chaos;
- creative and innovative in planning and the use of technologies;
- willingness to obtain and use weapons of mass destruction; and
- the group's members have no compunction about sacrificing their own lives.²

The characteristics of the 'new terrorism' create a radically different security challenge. Terrorist incidents are not confined to particular countries or regions in which terrorists groups have localised grievances - terrorism is a global phenomenon and could strike anywhere. Terrorist incidents could come with no notice, consist of simultaneous attacks, be highly innovative in approach and be designed to inflict large casualties and generate great fear and uncertainty.

Australia is not immune from the possibility of terrorist attacks. The comments of leading figures in prominent terrorist groups such as Al-Qa-ida and Jemmah Islamiyah suggest that Australia and Australians are a target for attacks. So the intent is certainly present. However, at this stage there is no direct, public evidence that there is a capability to launch an attack within Australia. But this could develop quickly given the global characteristic of terrorism.

² This list has been compiled from a variety of sources but the key characteristics identified are very similar. See Babbage, *op. cit.*; Dr Andrew Stewart and Peter Vanish, 'Terrorism - Finding answers to a global threat', *Asian Military Review*, pp. 45-47 at pp 45-46; and Peter Clarke, 'Four Hundred and fourteen days - counter-terrorism in the United Kingdom since 9/11, paper given to the Australian Homeland Security Conference, National Convention Centre, Canberra, 31 October 2002.

Given the characteristics of the new terrorism and the place of Australia as a potential target, key symbolic icons such as the Australian Parliament would be high on the list as possible sites for attack. This has changed fundamentally the security response that is required at Parliament House. There is now a need to consider much more realistically the possibility of a terrorist attack.

The response at Parliament House

Immediately following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the level of security threat was raised from low to medium including for Parliament House. A number of immediate actions were taken to tighten security. These actions focussed on access control and included screening all people entering the building, with the exception of Senators and Members, and restricting the use of unaccompanied passes for visitors to private areas of the building. In retrospect, these measures were simply a strengthening of the existing security framework rather than measures to meet the new security threat.\

As a result of the concern about the adequacy of security at Parliament House in light of the heightened security threat, the Presiding Officers asked the Parliamentary Service Commissioner, Mr Andrew Podger, to undertake a review of certain aspects of parliamentary administration including:

the advantages, financial and organisational, which may arise from a change to the administration of security within Parliament House.

In reporting in September 2002, Mr Podger concluded:

... in the aftermath of September 11, with Parliament House a prime potential terrorist target, the role of Parliament House security is dramatically expanded beyond [its] historical role. Parliament House security needs to be capable of anticipating and dealing with potential terrorist action and the balance between presentation and response must shift radically in favour of the former.

It needs to do this in an environment where public access to the Parliament and to parliamentary representatives is a longstanding and important component of Australian culture.³

Podger commented that security at Parliament House had been effective in dealing with security threats from protest activity, but he recognised that a fundamental shift needed to occur to deal with the new threat of potential terrorism. He also recognised that the radical shift in security arrangements should not be at the expense of the openness and accessibility of Parliament House.

The review and the realisation of the need to significantly upgrade security at Parliament House has prompted action on a number of fronts. There have been changes to the governance and administrative arrangements concerning security, there have been reviews of the major vulnerabilities in light of the new threat level and operational enhancements to change the security effort to prevention rather than response.

A Security Management Board was established to ensure that security policy and procedure was better coordinated and focussed. As well as advising the Presiding Officers on security issues, the Board has the overall executive responsibility for the security function. The Board is chaired by the secretary of Joint House Department (the department responsible for building management) and consists of the Usher of the Black Rod, the Serjeant-at-Arms, a representative of the ministerial wing and representatives from the key Commonwealth security advisory service.

On its establishment in March 2002, the Board immediately initiated a comprehensive review of security requirements in light of the heightened threat environment. As a result of the review, a number of operational enhancements have been progressively introduced. These enhancements include:

- installing permanent gates and barriers at the ministerial entrance, to restrict vehicle access;

³ Andrew Podger, Final Report - Review by the Parliamentary Service Commissioner of Aspects of the Administration of the Parliament, September 2002, p.10

- installing electronically controlled boom gates at the Senate and House of Representatives underground car park entrances;
- increasing restrictions on parking and leaving vehicles unattended at the Senate and House of Representatives underground car park entrances;
- commencing the screening of Senators and Members before entering the building;
- restricting pedestrians' access to the roof of Parliament House via the grassed ramps (pedestrians can still gain access from inside the building, having undergone security screening);
- installing barriers across forecourt and main entrance, at the front of Parliament House, to restrict vehicle access; and
- increasing the number of Australian Protective Service officers deployed in the precincts of Parliament House, and introducing explosive-detection dogs and specially trained bicycle patrol officers.

Further enhancements are expected in the future. In particular, there would need to be a further strengthening of security if the threat level increased.

Reaction - getting the balance right

As noted earlier in the paper, the great challenge in providing security in the parliament of a democratic country is getting the right balance between having security tight enough to meet the security threat while preserving the openness and accessibility expected of a parliamentary building. The more the security threat increases, the more difficult it becomes for people to accept that a reasonable balance is being achieved. As noted earlier, with an institution such as Parliament House which is subject to extensive media scrutiny, you receive very quickly a view about whether you are getting the balance right. As we will see from some of the reaction, it is a very difficult context in which to be providing security.

When the Podger review was tabled in October 2002, the media was very quick to focus on the identified inadequacies of parliamentary security. The headlines were: 'Parliamentary security "poor"'; 'House in need of security shake-up'; and 'House is on high alert - but not a guard to be seen'. In fact, by this time significant action already had been taken to tighten security, but the view being presented to the public was that our security was totally inadequate.

With the implementation in April 2003 of the enhanced security measures referred to earlier, and particularly the erection of the barriers at the front of Parliament House and on the roof, the view of the media was reversed. The headlines now were: 'Security bars parliamentary walkover'; and 'Don't fence me in!'.

The view that some security measures may have gone to far was also expressed by Members in a very recent survey of them. The summary of the comments of Members about the security changes (including the introduction of the screening of Members) was:

Most Members felt comfortable with the recent changes to internal security arrangements and were unconcerned about increased personal inspections. However, many felt the external barriers around the building were a bit over the top and discouraged public access. Many queried the rationale or lack of explanation of the rationale for many security changes.⁴

More recently, when it was suggested by the Chair of the Security Management Board at a hearing of a parliamentary committee that it may be necessary to look at more permanent barriers around Parliament House, the reaction in the media was as follows: 'Public outcry as security bunkers down in the house'; and 'Fortress - like Parliament House flagged'.

In the space of about six months, the perception of the security measures at Parliament House had gone from their being seen as poor and inadequate to being seen as fortress-like and bunkering down. As one of the staff with responsibility for security at Parliament House, I do wonder what we need to do so that we can be seen to be getting the balance right.

⁴ Department of the House of Representatives Members' Survey 2003.

Perhaps one way of assessing whether you are getting the balance right is to ask whether you are overreacting or underreacting to the threat of a terrorist action.⁵ Generally speaking security measures are seen to be an overreaction to the threat, until an incident happens. When an incident occurs, then the assessment invariably is that you have underreacted and should have had in place much tighter security measures. One can see this with the Bali bombing where there is now, with the benefit of hindsight, significant questioning of whether sufficient warning was given to Australian beforehand of the dangers in travelling to Indonesia generally, and Bali in particular.

The feedback from Members as part of the survey suggests some of the important issues that have to be addressed in achieving the right balance in security.

First, we need to be aware that the change in the security environment is not short term. The Director General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Dennis Richardson, has noted that the change can be expected to be with us for at least the next 3-5 years.⁶ As Dennis Richardson pointed out, this means that security measures need to be factored into long term not short term planning. We cannot afford to relax our security measures just because nothing happens, so long as the threat level remains the same.

Second it is essential that any security measures that are introduced have been carefully considered, their implications are known and have been assessed and that there is a consistency of approach. Quick, kneejerk reactions are not helpful. The views of Members indicated that they believed that, while security had been tightened in some areas, gaps were left in other areas.

This brings me to the third, and probably most important, issue - and that is communication. It is essential that we communicate the rationale for security measures that are put in place. This message comes through clearly from the misunderstanding by the media of the reasons for security measures being put in place and the views of Members as expressed in the survey.

⁵ See Alan M Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works: understanding the threat and responding to the challenge*, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 224. Dershowitz says he is often asked whether there is an overreaction or underreaction to the current terrorist threat.

⁶ Dennis Richardson, Address to the Australian Homeland Security Conference, Canberra, 31 October 2002.

A difficulty with security measures is that inevitably there is some secrecy surrounding them. However, we cannot allow this difficulty to prevent us from being as open as possible about why particular measures have been implemented, and also why some measures that people might think are needed have not been implemented.

A key message to convey to people is that there has been this fundamental shift in the security environment, and that the change is long term, not short term. I think this message has still not sunk in to the consciousness of many people, including many in the media. It will be the wider appreciation of the fundamental way in which security has changed that will lead to greater acceptance of the impact that measures that are implemented.

Finally, we should always be conscious that whatever security measures are introduced, we need to preserve the basis of our democratic system of government. Issues such as accessibility of ordinary citizens to the building and perceptions that security is creating a fortress or that parliamentarians are bunkering down need to be managed very carefully. It is essential that, despite any changes to security management, people feel that they can access their parliament building and parliamentarians and that the parliamentarians themselves feel that they have not lost touch with the community.