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Successive Australian governments complicit in US torture

By Mike Head

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Successive Australian governments, Labor and Liberal-National, have directly collaborated, or systematically covered up Canberra's involvement, in the CIA torture regime that was partially revealed in this week's US Senate Intelligence Committee report.

Despite being heavily redacted, the 500-page unclassified executive summary of the report on US torture describes, in detail, brutal crimes that clearly violate the Geneva War Conventions and the Convention against Torture.

In response, there has been a deafening silence within the Australian political establishment. Not a word of condemnation of the United States government has been heard from Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his ministers, or any of their predecessors, Labor or Coalition. Nor have the Greens uttered a word.

If a similar report had been issued in China, Russia or Syria, or any other country targeted by Washington and its allies, there would have been non-stop cries of "war crimes" and "human rights abuses."

This line-up speaks volumes about the readiness of all these parties to continue their complicity in the unspeakable abuses committed by Washington, and to utilise similar methods themselves.

The practices described in the Senate report—such as prolonged sleep deprivation, head-banging, sensory deprivation, exposure to extreme temperatures and confinement in stress positions—match those inflicted on three known Australian victims: Guantánamo Bay detainees David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib; and Jack Thomas, who was tortured in Pakistan.

In the US, the Republican Bush administration authorised the “enhanced interrogation program” and the Democrat Obama administration blocked all efforts to hold accountable those responsible. In Australia, the Howard Coalition government was a willing partner in the torture program and the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments fought tooth and nail to shield Howard and his ministers from political and legal liability.

The whitewashing continues under the current Abbott Coalition government.

A day after the Senate report was released, David Hicks challenged Attorney-General George Brandis at an official human rights function in Sydney. “I was tortured for five-and-a-half years in Guantánamo Bay in the full knowledge of your party. What do you have to say?” Hicks called out.

Hicks has previously detailed extensive periods of solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, severe beatings and forced druggings at the hands of his American captors, all with the knowledge and approval of Australian officials.

Brandis, who was a junior minister in the Howard government, scuttled off the stage. Yesterday, he vilified Hicks as a “terrorist.” Brandis’s slander is just another indication that the abuses of fundamental legal and democratic rights committed by the US and its allies will only worsen.

In 2007, Hicks only agreed to plead guilty to a trumped-up US Military Commission charge of supporting a terrorist organisation in order to be released from the Guantánamo hell-hole, where he had been incarcerated for nearly six years without a trial. It was a political fix orchestrated by the Howard government, which was facing mounting public outrage over its collusion in Hicks’s indefinite detention.

Hicks is currently appealing against his conviction, after US courts last year ruled that the charge laid against him was invalid because no such offence existed in 2001, when he was detained.

The Howard government, backed by the then Labor Party opposition, supported the Bush administration’s criminal practices. It echoed Washington’s claims that Hicks was among “the worst of the worst” terrorists and repeatedly denied any knowledge that he was tortured.

Once in office, the Rudd Labor government endorsed an Australian Federal Police “control order” on Hicks and blocked access to government documents on his treatment by the US military.

It was the same with Mamdouh Habib, who also spoke out on Wednesday. He was captured in Pakistan in October 2001 and sent to Egypt under the CIA’s rendition program. Like Hicks, he

was tortured with the Howard government's full knowledge. "I'm suffering when I see every day America accusing people of terrorism and they are the terrorists themselves," he told reporters.

Habib was finally released from Guantánamo in 2005, without any charge being laid against him, after evidence of his torture began to emerge. In 2007, court documents proved that Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer were given detailed briefings on Habib's complaints of torture as early as mid-2002. One briefing stated: "[Mr Habib] said he was tortured. Water was dripped on his head and he was administered electric shocks ... Mr Habib said he was trussed upside down and his body beaten. He said he sustained broken ribs, two broken toes and bleeding from his penis."

Four years later, following eye-witness accounts confirming that Australian officials witnessed Habib's rendition and torture, the Gillard government made an out-of-court settlement with him. After a five-year legal battle against Canberra's bipartisan coverup, Habib was offered a payment to absolve the Australian government of liability.

In Jack Thomas's case, the Howard government went further, placing him on trial for terrorism offences on the basis of an alleged confession he made as a result of torture. In January 2003, Thomas was detained at Karachi airport while trying to return to Australia. After being starved, shackled in stress positions and threatened with violence to his family by US and Pakistani operatives, he was further interrogated by Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) officers.

Thomas's initial conviction was overturned on appeal in 2006. The judges documented, in detail, the torture and "emotional manipulation" inflicted on him, and ruled that the criminal violence made his statements inadmissible.

Not a single member of the Howard government or the AFP-ASIO security apparatus has been held to account for these horrific crimes, despite the violations of international law and the Australian Criminal Code, which makes it a crime, punishable by up to 25 years' jail, to "aid, abet, counsel or procure" a "grave breach" of the Geneva Conventions.

This week's silence in the political elite has been accompanied by a dearth of commentary in the mainstream media. A solitary editorial appeared yesterday, in the erstwhile liberal Melbourne *Age*. It began with the proposition: "Torture does not work. Worse, it encourages extremists and damages the moral credibility and international authority of those using it."

In other words, the *Age*'s objections were tactical. If torture "worked," it would be fine. The editorial further asserted: "The extent of Australia's knowledge of and involvement in the US rendition program may never be known." This is nothing but a cover for the Howard government and its Labor accomplices.

None of these crimes is an aberration. They flow from the entirely fraudulent "war on terror," which serves as a pretext for predatory wars in the Middle East and the erection of a police-state framework at home. Since 2001 there has been a relentless assault on basic democratic rights in

Australia, including sweeping “anti-terrorism” laws, large-scale military-police mobilisations in capital cities, and mass surveillance by the spy agencies, as part of the global US network.

Far from lessening its involvement in Washington’s atrocities, Canberra’s part has intensified. US bases in Australia, such as Pine Gap, now play vital roles in the latest criminal program of the CIA and the Obama administration—drone assassinations of individuals, including US citizens, placed on presidential “kill lists.”